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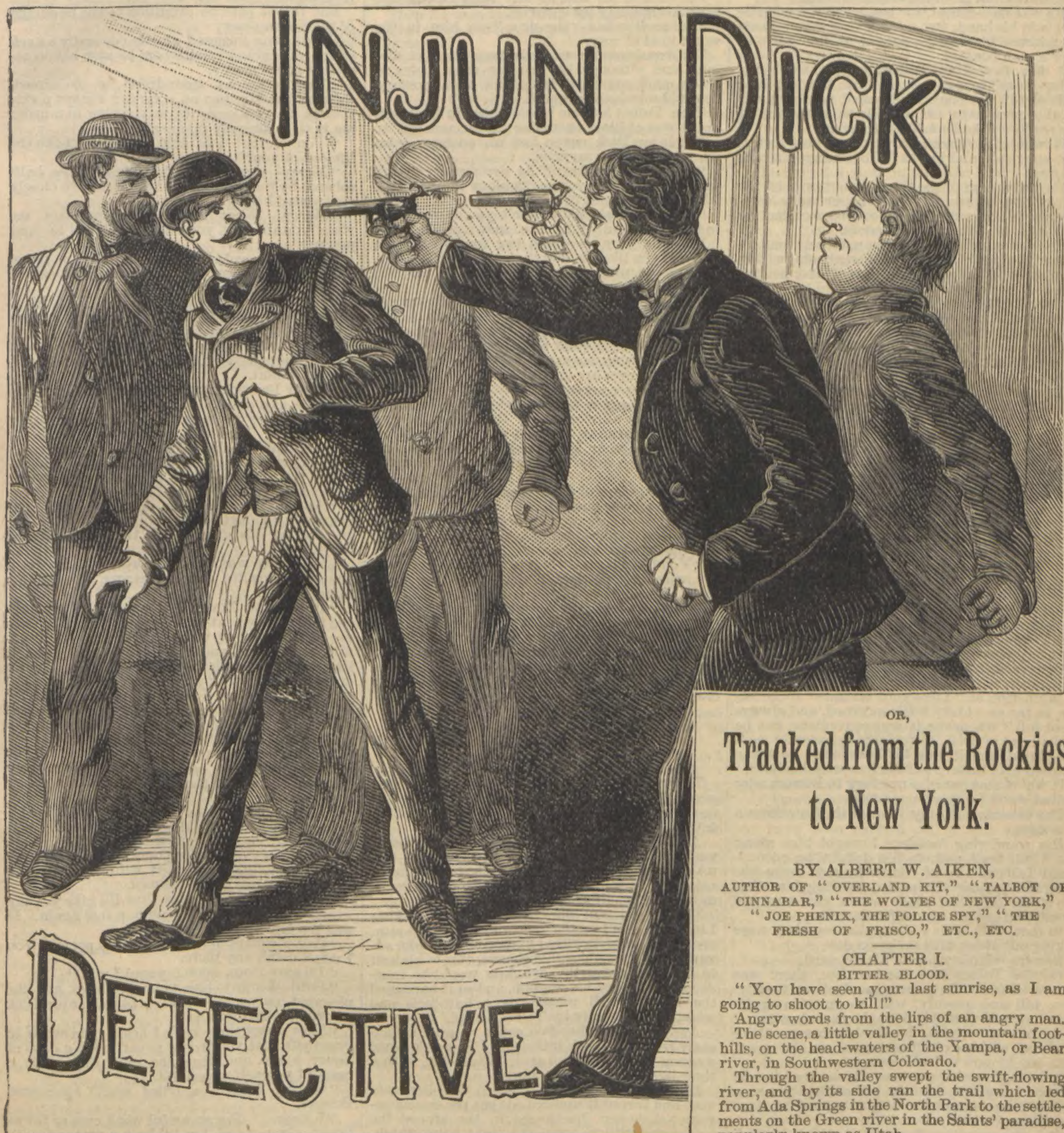
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OR,
**Tracked from the Rockies
to New York.**

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "TALBOT OF
CINNABAR," "THE WOLVES OF NEW YORK,"
"JOE PHENIX, THE POLICE SPY," "THE
FRESH OF FRISCO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
BITTER BLOOD.

"You have seen your last sunrise, as I am
going to shoot to kill!"

Angry words from the lips of an angry man.
The scene, a little valley in the mountain foot-
hills, on the head-waters of the Yampa, or Bear
river, in Southwestern Colorado.

Through the valley swept the swift-flowing
river, and by its side ran the trail which led
from Ada Springs in the North Park to the settle-
ments on the Green river in the Saints' paradise,
popularly known as Utah.

In the valley stood a solitary log-cabin, built

"HOW ARE YOU?" QUOTH INJUN DICK. "QUITE A SURPRISE-PARTY, ISN'T IT?"

after the fashion common to the South, two apartments divided by an open passage through the center of the house.

A sand bar extended into the stream, around it the water curved, and from the looks of the bar it was evident that the occupants of the cabin were engaged in that primitive style of gold-seeking known as placer-mining.

In front of the cabin were three men.

One was seated on a tree-trunk, with a tin pan on his lap, engaged in the prosaic occupation of peeling potatoes, but the knife he used was an eight-inch bowie, more fitted for removing the cuticle of a bear than the outer skin of Paddy's favorite vegetable.

One of nature's noblemen was this potato-peeler, too: a little above the medium height in stature, magnificently built, with a frank, open face, fringed by dark hair, snugly trimmed, and lit up by a pair of clear brown-black eyes, so penetrating in their gaze, that it would seem their owner might boast, with the ancient god, that he could look steadily into the full-orbed sun.

This man, formed by nature to be a king among his fellows, is no stranger to the readers who have followed the fortunes of the hero of Overland Kit and its sequels, for he was no other than Dick Talbot in person.

Richard Talbot, bold Injun Dick, a few years older than when we last introduced him to our readers' notice, but in no respect materially changed.

He was dressed in the rough fashion common to the mining-region, but there was a nattiness to his dress, a style about it, that plainly distinguished him from the common herd.

He was well-armed, for besides the formidable bowie in his hand, two self-cocking seven-shooters adorned his waist, a pair of as fine tools as ever a man boasted.

A few feet from Talbot, engaged in frying "flap-jacks" in a pan over a fire burning in a rude sort of fire-place built out of boulders, was another personage, also an old acquaintance of the reader of the Dick Talbot novels.

It was the veteran, Joe Bowers, just as fat, just as greasy, and just as full of strange conceits as ever.

The third man of the three, the utterer of the threatening words with which our story commences, is a stranger, for upon this occasion we first introduce him to our readers.

He was a tall, angular man, loosely put together, a man of forty or thereabouts, with a peculiarly odd face, lantern-jawed and hollow-cheeked, with sunken eyes.

Not a handsome man now, although it was evident that he had once been a pretty good-looking fellow, but strong liquor, to which he was plainly a slave, had worked its will upon him and reduced him to a condition little better than a wreck.

He was called Leander Beaverwick, but after the odd fashion common to the mining region he had been nicknamed Limber Bee, and was seldom addressed by any other appellation.

He had been absent on a visit to the nearest camp, some five miles down the stream, Yampa City, from whence all the miners in the foot-hills procured their supplies, and had just returned, with a full cargo of whisky aboard, as Bowers observed when he noticed the zig-zag approach up the trail of Limber Bee.

The three men were pards, although Talbot and Bowers did nearly all the work, for the lanky man generally managed to find some excuse for going to the camp every evening, from whence he invariably returned decidedly the worse for liquor, and as he was not a man who could stand much drink, the better part of the next day was occupied in sobering up.

Bowers, as all of our old readers will probably remember, was a man who obeyed the Scriptural injunction of "Love your enemies" to the letter, as far as whisky was concerned, and always "got full" whenever it was convenient, but he had a head of iron, a stomach apparently copper-plated, and it was his boast that he never allowed his pleasure to interfere with business.

It was somewhat of a mystery to Bowers why Talbot stood Limber's nonsense.

The veteran had only been with the others a few days.

His wandering footsteps brought him along the Utah trail, and, to his delight, he encountered Talbot, who of course insisted upon the veteran's joining the party, assuring him that the strike they had made was a rich one and would pan out a fortune if followed up.

In fact, with their rude appliances, they were taking out about fifty dollars a day.

Bowers willingly joined his old pard.

Besides Talbot and Limber Bee, there was Beaverwick's wife, a woman of about twenty-five, tall and queenly, with the most magnificent hair and eyes, black as the raven's wing.

As fair a woman, despite her coarse attire and total absence of all ornament, as the eye of man would care to look upon.

A strange, quiet, reserved woman too, one old beyond her years, one who had evidently seen a deal of trouble, and its weight had left a dark impress upon her.

She was very gentle, very pleasant, but seldom smiled, and bore the harsh treatment of

her husband, who was inclined to be quarrelsome and brutal when in his cups, with mild resignation.

Talbot, though, always took it upon himself to quietly interfere when the drunken man grew too abusive, and Limber Bee seldom attempted to dispute his authority.

Bowers shrewdly suspected it was for the sake of the woman that his one pard stood the man's nonsense.

Left to his own resources, weighed down by the fatal habit which had been growing on him day by day, it was plain that the two would speedily come to the point of starvation if subsistence depended upon Limber Bee's exertions.

Bowers had never even hinted to Talbot that he suspected how matters stood, for he knew Injun Dick of old, and understood that he was a man who did not care to talk about such things.

On this day of which we write, when we commence to trace the fortunes of these pilgrims by the Yampa's stream, Limber Bee, on the excuse that he was getting out of tobacco, had gone to the mining-town in the morning right after breakfast, and had not returned until sundown, just as his pards were preparing supper.

Mrs. Beaverwick, Alethea, as she was called, had taken the fishing-pole and gone up the stream to a noted trout-hole, half a mile away, to catch a mess of fish for supper, so the three men were alone.

Limber Bee had come up the trail in his winding, devious way, halted directly opposite Talbot, pulled out a ready-cocked revolver suddenly, and leveling it full at the breast of Injun Dick, addressed him as we have chronicled.

For once in his life, at any rate, Talbot was taken completely by surprise.

Limber Bee had "the drop" on him in the worst kind of way.

The drunken man was only some ten feet distant, and although he was far from being a crack marksman, yet it did not seem possible he could miss so easy a shot.

True, Talbot had his bowie-knife in his hand, but it was of little use under the circumstances.

But Injun Dick never lost his coolness, even when so taken by surprise.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Are you joking, or are you so drunk as not to know what you are doing?"

"You infernal villain, don't you dare to talk to me!" the plainly infuriated man fairly howled. "Down on your knees and beg for mercy, or I will kill you like the dog that you are!"

"Beg for mercy, and to you?" and Talbot's eyes fairly blazed as he put the question.

"Pshaw! man, you don't know what you are saying! What crazy notion is this that you have got into your noddle?"

"Why do you want to kill me—how am I a scoundrel—what harm did I ever do to you?"

"Oh, my eyes are opened at last!" the other cried, in hoarse accents.

"I have been a weak-minded fool, but now that I know all, you'll find that I am a very devil and I mean to slay you without mercy!"

"Down on your knees and say your prayers, for you have only a minute or two more of life!"

It was the face of a madman that Talbot gazed at, but he never quailed.

"I'm not so sure of that," he remarked, "but before you go ahead on this rifle spit out why you want to kill me."

"You have been trying to separate me from my wife—my peerless Alethea, and you must die!"

There was death in the man's eyes; his finger pressed the trigger, but at the same instant Bowers's frying-pan came sailing through the air, hurled with so true an aim that it hit Limber Bee full in the face and drew from him a howl of pain which mingled with the sharp crack of the revolver.

CHAPTER II.

LIMBER BEE FINDS HIS MASTER.

THE prompt action of the veteran bumner had saved the life of his old pard, for death was in the heart of the infuriated drunkard, and he fully determined upon killing Talbot.

And our hero was so thoroughly at a disadvantage that there isn't the least doubt the pistol-shot of Limber Bee would have inflicted a mortal wound had not Joe Bowers worked a miracle in behalf of his ancient friend.

The frying-pan, flap-jacks and all, striking Limber Bee full in the face, disordered his aim, and Talbot, quick-witted and prompt to take advantage of every possible chance, threw himself to one side just as the drunken would-be murderer discharged his weapon, and so it happened the revolver-ball missed by a half-inch and whistled harmlessly by Talbot's head.

And before Limber Bee could recover sufficiently from the shock inflicted by Bowers's novel weapon to fire a second shot, Injun Dick, with a tiger-like spring, was on him.

He grasped the right wrist of the desperate man and forced it upward so that the second revolver-shot was discharged in the air; at the same time with his powerful right hand clutching the other by the throat, he threw him over

backward, and adding his own weight to the fall, pinioned Limber Bee to the ground, utterly helpless.

The fight was over.

"Knocked out in one round!" ejaculated the veteran, with a snort of disgust.

"W'ot kind of a fighter do you call yourself, Limber Bee, anyway?"

"You're a nice kind of a hair-pin to tackle a man like Dick Talbot."

"Have you picked out the spot whar you would like to be planted?"

"Say, Dick, squeeze the cuss, and then we kin use him to start a graveyard with; I ain't been to a funeral for more'n a year, and I'm gitting kinder rusty."

The shock of the fall had sent the pistol flying from Limber Bee's hand, and in his desperation he attempted to grapple with the man whom he had tried to murder, but it would have been as possible for a common cur dog to hold his own against a blooded bull-terrier as for Limber Bee to contend with the iron-limbed, steel-muscled Dick Talbot.

The struggle only lasted a moment, and then Injun Dick, half-throttling the other with his left hand twisted in the collar of the red flannel shirt which he wore, raised the dangerous right "duke," and held it in menacing proximity to the nose of the miner.

Joe Bowers observed this proceeding with infinite satisfaction.

"Go fur him, Dick, old pard! Hit him one on the bugle fur me; and arter you hammer him to your heart's content, turn him so as I kin git some satisfaction by spanking him with the frying-pan!"

But Talbot paid no attention to the badinage of the fat bumner.

He was too incensed at the cowardly attack of the miserable wretch whom he now held completely at his mercy.

"You infamous scoundrel!" he exclaimed, shaking Limber Bee as a terrier shakes a rat; "what do you mean by attempting to murder me in this cowardly manner?"

"You wretch! I've half a mind to choke the life out of you!"

"Mercy—mercy!" gurgled Limber Bee, half-sobered by the deadly peril which now so closely confronted him.

"Mercy! What mercy did you show me when you thought you had me helpless in your power?"

"By all the rules of war your life is mine! Why should I spare you, you cowardly assassin? You do not deserve to live."

"By right you should die, and I ought to choke the life out of you so that you will never be able to do any more mischief."

And Talbot tightened his grip on the throat of the other just as if he fully meditated executing the threat.

Limber Bee was horribly alarmed and became as white as a ghost.

"Spare me!" he gasped. "For Heaven's sake have mercy! Think of my wife—my Alethea—what would she do without me? I was crazy with liquor, or else I never would have tried to harm you. Don't I owe everything to you?—hain't you been like a brother to me?"

"And a nice way you take to show your gratitude," Talbot remarked in contempt, slightly relaxing his grasp upon the throat of the other.

Limber Bee was quick to perceive there was a chance for his life, and he became abject in his humiliation.

"It was the liquor, I tell you, and some of the fellers down at the camp kinder talked to me 'bout how you was payin too much attention to Alethea, and how I ought to resent it like a man, and the first thing I knew I got a crazy notion into my head that I ought to kill you, and that's how I come to pull the revolver."

"Nice sort of man you are to listen to such stories and allow a pack of meddling scamps to make a fool of you," Talbot remarked.

"You managed to give me a close call for my life, but you can bet every dollar you have in the world that you have had a closer one."

"If it had not been for your wife, whom I respect for a thoroughly good woman, I would have killed you without mercy for you richly deserve to pay dearly for your cowardly attack."

"So help me Heaven, it will never happen again!" Limber Bee exclaimed.

"If you'll spare me this time I'll give you my word that I'll never be such a fool again. It was the liquor, I tell you."

"Call it square this time and I'll promise you I won't drink any more."

"I'll give it up, upon my soul I will!"

"Bah! Limber Bee, your promises are like pie-crust, only made to be broken," Injun Dick retorted, contemptuously.

"How many times have I heard you swear to your wife that you would never touch a drop of liquor again, and then the next day make a beast of yourself as usual?"

"Gitting fuller'n a b'iled owl!" ejaculated Bowers.

"I know i; I'm an awful weak cuss as far as liquor is concerned, but I'll keep a promise made to you," Limber Bee whimpered.

"She's only a woman, you know, and what right has a woman got to try and hamper a man?"

"None at all, even though the actions of the lord of creation is breaking her heart and hurrying her rapidly down the dark path that leads to dusty death," Talbot observed, with bitter accent.

"I won't attempt to make you promise to abstain from drinking, because I don't believe you would do it, and I am not anxious to make a liar out of any man, but this I will say to you: if you allow any such madness as seized upon you to-day to again possess you I will kill you with as little compunction as though you were a mad dog."

Hardly had the words left Talbot's lips when around the bend in the trail, not twenty yards distant, came Alethea Beaverwick, a light fishing-pole carried carelessly over her shoulder and a fine string of trout in her other hand.

She started in surprise as she perceived the peculiar position of the two men, and then hurried forward, a grave and anxious look upon her face.

Talbot released his grasp on the other, and rose to his feet, remarking carelessly as he bid so:

"There, old fellow, I've shown you a trick that mighty few wrestlers know, and if you once got the hang of it, the man who puts you on your back will have to be an extra good one."

Limber Lee was quick to take the cue. He understood that Injun Dick wished to lead his wife to believe that they had been engaged in a friendly wrestling bout.

"Oh, I will not forget it," Limber Bee replied, rising slowly to his feet, feeling considerably the worse for the rough handling which he had experienced.

"You ain't cut out for a wrestler, though, Limber Bee," Joe Bowers observed, with the air of an expert, rising and possessing himself of the frying-pan as he spoke, and then resuming his former occupation.

"Your legs are too long, and you ain't built from the ground up as a wrestler ought for to be."

"You allers come out a heap sight better by running away from a fight than by gitting into it."

"Running is your best holt, and you had better jest stick a pin in thar."

Limber Bee laughed in an uneasy way, and shambled off toward the cabin without hardly bestowing a look upon his wife.

A slight expression of contempt passed rapidly over the face of the woman as she glanced at the men, and then, after Limber Bee had disappeared within the cabin, she held up the fish for Talbot's inspection.

"A fine lot," he remarked.

"Yes," and then she sat down upon the log by his side, took out a knife and began to prepare the fish for the pan.

Talbot resumed the peeling of the potatoes with as much *sang froid* as though it had been the principal occupation of his life.

"My husband and you have been amusing yourselves, it would seem," she observed, in a low tone, so that it would only reach the ears of Talbot.

"Yes, a little," the man replied, carelessly.

"I believe you think I do not possess common-sense!" she exclaimed, bitterly. "Why did you hold your hand when you had the miserable wretch at your mercy?"

"Oh, you mustn't talk like that—it isn't right," Talbot expostulated.

"No; it is only right to suffer and to die!"

And then silence fell upon the group until supper was prepared.

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

THE frugal supper of the four oddly-assorted people was not a cheerful meal, although the veteran bummer did his best to enliven the monotony of the affair with a few jocose remarks, but none of the rest were in the humor for merriment, and finding his efforts were not appreciated, Bowers soon desisted.

After supper was over the men took out their pipes and selected convenient seats on the outside of the cabin, watching the sun descend in the far west, while blowing forth huge clouds of smoke.

The woman remained within, tidying up for the night.

Hardly a word passed between the three men until the sun sunk out of sight, and then Limber Bee suddenly rose up with the remark that he "reckoned" he had better go to town, as the supply of matches and salt was about exhausted.

"I suppose you will come home as full as a tick, as usual," Bowers observed.

"No, sir-ee, hoss-fly!" Limber Bee exclaimed. "It won't be safe for you to bet on that for you would get skinned of every cent you put up."

"I shall come home to-night as sober as a judge, and I shall be home early, too."

"Just as soon as the moon comes up enough for to give me light I shall start."

"Well, me noble dook, you will quit the halls of dazzling light in good season then, for the moon comes up somewhar 'round eight, and you will have light enuff to navigate splendidly by nine."

"Somewhar 'round ten then you kin look for me," and Limber Bee rose to depart.

"Say, I've a durned good mind to go down along with you!" Bowers exclaimed, abruptly.

"I ain't been to the camp for a month of Sundays. You don't mind my going, do you Dick?"

"Nary time; but don't stay all night, and don't take on board a bigger cargo of bug-juice than you can conveniently carry."

"Oh, don't you be afeard in regard to that air!" the bummer exclaimed, confidently. "The man lives not on the earth who kin say that he ever saw the ole original Joe Bowers so full of liquor that he couldn't hold any more. I'm like an omnibuster, allers room for one more."

"I'll bring him home all right," Limber Bee remarked, with a patronizing air, which the veteran at once resented.

"You bring me home! Go 'way! W'ot kind of a duffer are you, anyway?"

"Better man than you are!" Limber Bee retorted, taking up the advance for the lower camp.

"Yes; better man to be hanged!"

And so, bandying rude jests, the two disappeared in the distance.

For ten or fifteen minutes Talbot sat alone in the rapidly gathering gloom, enjoying his pipe and busy with his thoughts which were not altogether pleasant.

Then Alethea came from the house and seated herself upon a tree-stump a few feet from where Talbot sat.

For a few moments she watched him in silence, and then suddenly said:

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Talbot."

"Upon my word, I don't believe they are worth it," he replied.

"Mr. Talbot, why did you attempt to deceive me about that trouble you had with my husband just before supper?" she asked.

"Now don't try to evade the question!" she exclaimed in quite an imperious way, as Dick was about to open his mouth to reply.

"I do not suppose you consider that I know any more than the law allows," she continued, with perceptible bitterness, "but I am not altogether without sense."

"I have been expecting there would be trouble between you for over a week now. I suppose I ought to have warned you of my suspicions so you might have been on your guard, but I felt you would be able to take care of yourself, and then I did not think my miserable wretch of a husband would pluck up courage enough to attack you."

"I expected he would storm at and threaten you as he does me, but I hardly thought he would do more."

"And how absurd this frantic jealousy of a wife for whom he cares absolutely nothing."

"But, Mrs. Beaverwick, really this isn't the way that you ought to talk of your husband," Talbot remarked, in a tone of admonition.

"Not my husband—my master!" she exclaimed, with bitter accents.

"Of course, the story of my life is a sealed book to you, but it is time that the volume was opened."

"A strange chapter of incidents brought me to these Western wilds, and a little over six months ago, I found myself sick, friendless and alone in a little hamlet where, through no fault of mine, every one avoided me as though I carried a deadly pestilence upon my person."

"I was in the depths of despair when this man came to my rescue. He professed to be wealthy. In reality he had a few thousands only."

"He bought me, just as much as though I had been put up on the auction block and sold to him."

"I was a coward and feared to die and so I became the wife of this mean-spirited wretch."

"It did not take him long to get rid of his money, and then we drifted out into this section where we made your acquaintance, and you were generous enough to join your fortunes to ours and dragged us up from utter poverty—perhaps from a cruel death by starvation—to our present comfortable position."

"You have seen what sort of a life I lead now—a perfect hell on earth with this petty fiend who fairly hates me because I will not yield him perfect obedience."

"He could get a hundred dollars a week if I would consent to go as cashier in one of these miserable gambling booths, or as much more from the managers of the variety tents if I would sing in their shows."

"And that was the reason why he married me. He thought that the attractions and accomplishments which Heaven had bestowed upon me would procure a sumptuous living without his being obliged to work."

"I would not consent, and he has endeavored to drive me to despair ever since."

"For the last week he has pretended to be madly jealous of you, and a hundred times has sworn to me that he would kill both you and me on the first convenient opportunity."

"Barking dogs seldom bite," observed Talbot, dryly.

"True, I laugh at his threats and despise them as much as I do him, but how much longer am I obliged to submit to this awful life?" she demanded.

"Would I be lost beyond all redemption if I should say to the only man in the world whom I know I can trust, 'Take me, I am yours whenever you choose to say the word. Let us fly far from this spot and in some calm and peaceful corner of the universe find the happiness that is denied us here?'"

There was quite a long pause. Talbot, puffing away at his pipe, stared straight at the dusky gloom which by this time entirely covered the face of nature.

One by one the stars were peeping out, and afar off the faint glow which pervaded the sky heralded the coming of the moon.

"You do not answer—is the question such a difficult one, then?" Alethea asked, her tone bitter and her face full of hard lines, making her look ten years older.

"Yes, indeed it is, for when such a question is put it is a sore temptation for a man to answer according to his passions and not by his judgment."

"Your judgment, then, would think the woman was in the wrong to take such a step?"

Bitter as gall was the tone in which he spoke. "Decidedly."

There wasn't the least bit of hesitation about the reply.

The woman rose proudly to her feet.

The flames were still leaping in the rudely-constructed fireplace and gave light to the scene.

"Dick Talbot, you are either more or less than man!" she exclaimed.

She would have spoken further, for she was full of speech, had not the approach of a stranger down the trail coming from the direction of Ada Springs interrupted the interview.

The traveler was an old man, miserably clad, with a long iron-gray beard and disheveled hair of the same hue.

He carried a staff in his hand and a pack on his back, and appeared footworn and weary.

"Good-evening, pard," he said, as he came up to Talbot, in a quivering, cracked voice; "may I be so bold as to ask the road to Murphy's Gulch?" and then his eyes resting upon the face of the woman, he nodded to her and said:

"It's a dark night, ma'am, but it's always the darkest afore the moon comes up."

The odd speech, so entirely uncalled for, attracted Talbot's attention, and he scrutinized the stranger closely, bestowing also a glance upon Alethea.

She was bending forward, surveying the old man with almost breathless interest, and Talbot fancied that he saw a rapid glance of recognition exchanged between the two.

It was done so quickly, though, if it was done at all, that Dick was not certain whether he had seen aright or had been deceived by his imagination.

"The road to Murphy's Gulch splits off from the main trail about half a mile from here," Alethea said, before Talbot could reply. "I'll show you if you like, for you would be apt to miss it in the darkness."

She ran into the house, got her hat, and, with a brief salutation to Talbot, departed with the stranger.

Talbot was amazed, and knew not what to make of the strange affair.

Time passed on; the moon came up, and the light grew stronger and stronger until the face of the country was plainly illuminated.

Ten o'clock came, then eleven, but not a soul returned to the cabin.

CHAPTER IV.

DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES.

TALBOT rose to his feet after consulting his timepiece and finding that it was after eleven.

"There's something wrong!" he exclaimed. "Can Alethea have eloped with that old codger, or have been carried off by him against her will?"

"I hardly think that, for he didn't look strong enough to try any such game. Maybe, though, he was only the agent of somebody in the background."

"And what the deuce has become of Bowers and Limber Bee?"

"I don't wonder so much at their absence, for I expected that both of them would get full at the camp, and a sharp would be safe in betting that they wouldn't make the cabin until near morning."

"I must look into this mystery though."

Going to the cabin, he took his repeating-rifle, closed the door carefully, turned the key in the padlock by means of which the door of the cabin was fastened, and concealed the key under the boulder just at the side of the house, a place of deposit known to all the occupants of the cabin.

"Now, then, which way shall I go?" questioned Talbot, communing with himself.

A quarter of a mile down the stream the trail split in twain.

One road followed the course of the river through a deep and gloomy canyon, known far and wide as the Devil's Den, the other, by a *detour*, passed around the rocky formation, the center of which had in a far distant age been riven asunder by an earthquake's giant force, or some other strange convulsion of nature, thus forming the canyon.

Although the road through the Devil's Den was about half a mile shorter than the other, yet, after nightfall, few travelers cared to pass through the gloomy canyon, and so the other road was generally used.

Talbot decided to go by the road over the divide, for he did not think either Limber Bee or Bowers would be apt to come through the canyon—not that the veteran bummer feared he would encounter any hobgoblins on his way, for Talbot knew Bowers of old, and was well aware that the old, original J. B. was not afraid of spirits in any shape, but the road through the canyon was a gloomy one, dark as a pocket, excepting when the moon hung directly over the gorge so that its beams could chase away the shadows that were wont to cluster so thickly in the Devil's Den.

Limber Bee, he knew, was inclined to be a little weak-kneed and superstitious, and the chances were a hundred to one that he would not come through the canyon unless accompanied by a host of friends.

So it will be perceived that Injun Dick had good reasons for selecting the upper road.

Yet, somehow, when he came to where the trail forked into the two paths, he felt a strong inclination to take the lower road through the canyon.

One of those strange presentiments which had occurred to him every now and then in the course of his strangely adventurous life, whispered to him to take the lower road.

But he fought against the feeling, saying: "Nonsense! I shall miss them, sure, if I go that way!"

And so he struck into the upper trail.

It was a good two miles from the point where the trail divided to where the two united in one again, and Talbot covered half of the distance without coming across any trace of his pards.

But just as he came to the summit of the divide, his attention was attracted to a large gray object which seemed to be endowed with life.

It was too large for a man, and upon coming nearer, Talbot discovered that it was a gray mule which seemed to be tethered by the side of the trail, and was nibbling contentedly at the fresh young spring grass.

It was a strange place for an animal to be tethered, and Talbot hurried forward, curious to ascertain what it meant.

When he came up to the animal he found that it was tethered to a man who lay sound asleep in a sort of sheltered nook between two large boulders.

The man was evidently a judge of mules, and posted in regard to their wandering ways.

He plainly belonged to the tribe whose motto was, "It's a cold day when I get left," and to guard against the possibility of being deserted by his four-footed beast, he had tied the lariat to one of his own legs.

The moment Talbot discovered how matters stood, he felt satisfied that the sleeper was the veteran bummer, for of all men he was the one to be up to all such strokes of genius.

True enough, it was Bowers, and as drunk as a lord.

A friend at the camp had lent him the mule, Bowers having imbibed so much liquor as to be incapable of walking, and he had clung to the animal's back until overcome by sleep, and then, despite his drunkenness, had had sense enough to tie the mule so that it could not wander away while he took a cosey nap.

There were no signs, though, of either Limber Bee or the girl anywhere in the neighborhood.

With a mind impressed with fears that some untoward accident had happened, Talbot exerted himself to wake the bummer.

It was no easy job, for Bowers had not been on a spree for some weeks, and on this occasion he had made up for lost time.

At last Bowers woke to consciousness, and rising up with a great deal of dignity, asked:

"See hyar, w'ot do you mean, you mule-eating bullwhacker, by 'sturbing a gen'leman arter he's retired for the night?"

"If this disgustin' conduct is repeated I shall be obliged to change my hotel."

"Stop your nonsense! it is I, Dick Talbot," the other cried. "Shake off this dullness, for there's work on hand."

"All right—all right, Dick, old pard, lemme alone for a minit."

Then Bowers went through some cabalistic passes, rubbed the knuckles of his fat fingers in his eyes a few times, puffed out his cheeks, grunted like a hog in sore distress, and then looking at Talbot, nearly all traces of intoxication having disappeared as if by magic, asked:

"Well, Dick, ole pard, w'ot is it? Yer uncle is a leetle under the weather, but when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw, and don't you forget it."

"Where is Limber Bee?"

"Durned if I know; we jawed 'bout all the way to town, for he was as savage as a bob-tailed horse in fly-time over the way you upset his apple-cart, and I wouldn't take none of his sarse, you bet!"

"Then I met him once or twice cavorting 'round town, and we started for home 'bout ten o'clock."

"A friend of mine lent me this Arabian steed, 'cos I was jest the tiredest man that ever attempted to navigate, and when we got to whar the trails parted, Limber Bee, like the ornery cuss that he is, made up his mind to go through the canyon, and as I wasn't a-going to risk breaking my neck over the rocks, 'cos I ain't very well acquainted with this war-horse, and I don't go much on strange mooles anyway, I quit him."

"You left town about ten?"

"Yes, and I would have been home, somewhere 'round eleven if I hadn't got so 'tarnal sleepy that I couldn't keep on the animile's back nohow."

"Strange! Limber Bee has not come, and it is after twelve now."

"Show!"

"And Alethea went out about nine to show an old pilgrim who came along the trail to Murphy's Gulch, and she has not returned."

"You don't tell me! W'ot do you think it means?" asked the bummer, in amazement.

"I don't know what to make of it," Talbot replied, thoughtfully. "I had a good opinion of the woman; I always reckoned she was about as square as they make 'em, but to-night, when that old pilgrim came along, a man old enough to be her father, and, to judge from his looks, in the hardest kind of luck, I fancied that the two knew each other, although they didn't manifest any sign of open recognition."

"Now, by me halidome! this waxes mysterious!" exclaimed the veteran, in his absurd, theatrical way.

"I don't know what to make of it, but I think the first thing to be done is to examine the canyon. Limber may have fallen amid the rocks there, and broken his neck."

"No such luck—no, I don't mean that, for I'm durned if it matters to me the wag of a yaller dog's tail whether he's dead or alive; except that if the cuss has kicked the bucket, you and I will have to divy on his share of the gold hid in the cabin."

"You forget Alethea; she is his heir."

"S'pose she sloped with the old pilgrim?"

"Oh, that ain't likely; but, come, let's get into the canyon."

"Dick, old pard, I'll have to ride the moole, for my legs ain't got over their drunk yet, if my head has."

"All right."

Talbot assisted Bowers to mount, and then away they went, Dick leading the mule by the bridle.

They reached the mouth of the canyon.

The moon now hung directly over the gloomy gorge, so that the rays fell into it and afforded a weird sort of light.

As they entered the canyon Talbot remembered the presentiment which he had had that he ought to go that way.

Half-way through the gorge the mule gave a shiver of affright and refused to stir a step further. Every hair on the animal seemed to stand on end.

The brute realized that he was in the presence of the grim King of Terrors.

Right in Talbot's pathway, with his white and ghastly face turned up to the moon, lay the body of Limber Bee.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEATH-TRAP.

THE two came upon the body so unexpectedly that it gave both of them a start, although they were in a measure prepared for the worst.

"Poor cuss! he's cashed his checks for good and all!" Bowers ejaculated, leaning forward, craning his neck over the head of the bulky mule so as to get a better view of the body.

"Yes, and he has come to his death by foul play too. Do you see the knife in his throat?" Talbot asked.

"Sart'in! I allers has my peepers open for all sich little playthings!" the veteran replied.

"And I tell you, ole pard, the cuss w'ot settled Limber's hash was no slouch. Do you see how neatly the knife was driven through the throat? Jest a single dig, and Limber's cake was all dough!"

"Do you think you can walk to the body? for the mule is too scared to come a step further. It's strange what terror death has for dumb brutes like mules and horses."

"You bet; it takes a heap of training to get 'em used to it. The dumb critters seem to know that things air out of kilter," Bowers remarked. "I reckon I kin manage to keep on my pins now if I get a good ready on," he continued.

"This hyer tragedy has kinder sobered me up a bit."

Bowers dismounted, taking particular care to

fasten the lariat of the mule so that the animal could not take "French leave," as he expressed it, and then the two drew near the body of the murdered man.

Limber Bee had evidently not been killed without a struggle, as the ground bore evident marks of one, the stones being disturbed and the earth kicked up.

"What do you make of it?" Bowers asked, after a few minutes' examination.

"I don't exactly know," Injun Dick replied, thoughtfully. "His pockets turned inside out and his shirt slit open evidently for the purpose of ascertaining whether he had a money-belt strapped to his waist. His weapons too are gone, and yet, somehow, it doesn't seem to me as if the murder was committed for the sole purpose of plunder."

"If it was, the feller, or fellers, w'ot did the trick got mighty set back, for to my sart'in knowledge, Limber was clean broke when he started for home. He tried to strike me for a stake, but I wouldn't have it."

"No confidence in Limber, eh?"

"Oh, I had all the confidence in the world but I didn't have the ducats," Bowers replied, with a grin.

"From the way the body lies I judge that Limber grappled with his assailant—somehow. I've a notion that there was only one man mixed up in the business—and while they were clinched the fellow took him in the throat with the knife."

"I reckon that was the way the job was done. Limber wasn't worth shucks as a fighter, anyway," Bowers observed.

Then carefully Talbot examined the knife which had evidently made the deadly wound in the throat.

It was not a bowie, or a knife such as is generally worn by the inhabitants along the line of the frontier, but a common clasp-knife with a five-inch blade, narrow and formed so as to shut up, with a spring at the back to keep the blade stiff when it was open.

"That knife is the weapon of an Eastern man, or one recently from the East," Injun Dick remarked, showing the tool to Bowers.

"No Western man would bother with such a toy."

"Sure as ye'r horn!" the veteran concluded.

"Well, we cannot do anything more to-night. We'll leave the body just as it is, and notify the camp the first thing to-morrow morning. Then we can organize a posse and start in to catch the murderer."

"Sart'in," and Bowers untied his mule and climbed up on his back again.

"But, I say, ole pard, Dick, this hyer don't explain w'ot has become of the female woman."

A cloud came over Talbot's face.

He hated to give expression to the suspicion, but in his mind there was a surmise that in some dark and mysterious way she was connected with this fearful tragedy.

He did not give utterance to the suspicion though, for he hated to acknowledge, even to himself, that such a thing existed, so he contented himself with replying, carelessly:

"Oh, I've not the least doubt we will find her at the cabin when we get there; all that troubles me is, how will we break the news of this terrible tragedy to her?"

"Yes, it will be apt to be ugly; but it's got to be done somehow."

Then the two took up their homeward march.

There were few words exchanged until the two came in sight of their cabin, for each was busy with his own thoughts.

But when they came in view of the cabin Talbot noticed that the door was wide open, and called Bowers's attention to the fact.

"She is there, as I told you she would be," he said. "You see the cabin door is open, and when I left the house to go in search of you and Limber, I locked the door and put the key under the stone."

"Mighty strange, seems to me, that she ain't got a light, or nothing," Bowers observed, "and w'ot on airth did she want to leave the door wide open fer in sech an outlandish fashion?"

And then, as the two approached the cabin, a sudden suspicion seized them that all was not right, for the place seemed deserted.

And it was deserted.

Not a soul was in or near the cabin, the two men excepted.

"W'ot in thunder does this mean?" Bowers exclaimed, dismounting from the mule and securing the animal to a convenient tree-trunk.

"I cannot understand, for I locked the padlock before departing on my quest."

"Some one's been hyer since you been gone, and no mistake," the veteran observed, and then a horrible suspicion occurred to him.

"Say, ole pard, s'pose some galoots have gone through the ranch and found our gold? That would be a nice how-to-do!"

The self-same thought had occurred to Talbot, and he lost no time in striking a match and stepping into the cabin, closely followed by Bowers.

Their alarm was not without reason, for the pards had over three thousand dollars in dust and nuggets concealed in a hiding-place cunningly contrived at the back of the fireplace.

The candle was upon the table just as it had been left.

Talbot applied the match to it, the wick sputtered for a moment as though it had been wet, and then the light began to illuminate the apartment.

A howl of despair came from the fat bummer as he looked toward the hiding-place of the secret hoard.

All the back of the fireplace had been torn out.

The gold was gone!

"Sold ag'in and somebody's got the money!" Bowers exclaimed, sinking into a chair with a melodramatic action that would have made the fortune of an ordinary tragedian.

Even calm and quiet Injun Dick was betrayed into an exclamation of annoyance.

It was no joke to be robbed of so large a sum, for fortune had not gone well with our hero since the time when we last described his adventures; unlucky investments had swept away nearly all his hard-earned money, and he relied upon this gold to give him a fresh start in the race for wealth.

"Look-a-hyer, old pard Dick, is thar any connection atween these hyer two things—the pig-sticking of Limber Bee and this hyer raid on our treasure-box?" Bowers cried, abruptly.

"Well, I don't know; that is a difficult question that you have put and it is impossible for me to answer it decidedly at present.

"All I can say is that it looks mighty like it."

"W'ot is to be done, old pard?"

"What is to be done?" exclaimed Talbot, his eyes flashing fire. "Why, there is only one thing, Bowers, that we can do, and that is to hunt down the scoundrels who perpetrated these deeds.

"Limber Bee was not a man that I loved, but he was my pard; I had good reason for joining company with him, and it is my duty to avenge his murder, no matter who did the deed."

"Tain't possible, is it, that the wife was the feller that stuck him?" Bowers asked, slowly, with a sideways glance.

A dark look gathered upon Talbot's face, and from the expression, it was plain that the surmise had occurred to him, but he fought against it, unwilling to give shelter to the thought.

"See here, Bowers, old fellow, we have no business to think that way about the woman," he replied.

"We haven't a particle of proof against her, and as far as we know she has always acted on the square, hasn't she?"

"Oh, yes," the veteran was forced to admit. "I can't really say as how I kin put my finger on anything she ever did, since I've known her, that wasn't right up to the mark."

"That is exactly how I have found her, and I hate to think, even for a moment, that she ain't all right."

"She had cause to kill the skunk twenty times over, but that don't go to prove that she did the job," Bowers observed.

"But I say, ole pard, how about our gold? Who gave that little raffle away?"

"A careful search may have revealed the secret."

"That's true, but it ain't likely. The woman wouldn't go back on us, would she?"

"I should hate to think of her in that way!" Talbot replied, earnestly.

At this point the candle which was quite a short one began to splutter in a very peculiar way.

Talbot watched it for a moment, and then suddenly cried in alarm:

"Run for your life, Bowers, we are in a death-trap; the candle is connected with a fuse!"

Hardly had the words left his lips when there came a terrific explosion. A mine had been fired.

CHAPTER VI.

THE OATH.

TALBOT had guessed correctly.

A death-trap had been set to catch whoever should come into the cabin and light the candle.

The apparently harmless bit of tallow was so arranged, that after it had burned down to a certain point, it connected with a fuse which passed through a hole in the table down to a mine formed in the floor under that article of furniture.

The explosion was a terrible one, and it came so quickly upon Talbot's discovery of the death-trap, that it was utterly impossible for either of the two to escape from the doomed cabin.

The very foundations of the house were shaken by the force of the explosion, and the walls and roof lifted up bodily.

Talbot, who happened to be standing in front of the door, was carried by the force of the explosion right out into the middle of the river and hurled headlong into the startled waters, trembling in their bed at the force of the shock.

For the moment our hero was stunned, and he fancied, as he was being wafted like a feather through the air, that his last hour had come.

In such moments of peril the brain works quickly, and remembrances of all the tight places in which he had been placed during his

life of adventure, and the almost marvelous ways in which he had escaped death a hundred times, at least, floated across his memory; but he was forced to admit that this present peril bid fair to eclipse them all.

Then he went souse into the waters of the Yampa, just about deep enough at this season of the year to give him a good, thorough ducking.

He sunk like lead to the bottom, but the contact of the cold water restored his senses, momentarily paralyzed by the force of the shock which he had experienced, and feeling that he was worth fully twenty dead men, he struck out lustily.

A few strokes brought him to the surface, and a half a dozen more carried him out of deep water to a sand-bank from whence he could easily wade ashore.

The ruins of the cabin had been set on fire by the explosion and were now burning fiercely.

The mule, who had also been blown into the river, had made its way to the opposite shore, not materially damaged, and now stood upon the bank regarding the fire with a meditative look, evidently the most astonished animal that ever went on four legs.

Bowers, the veteran, was nowhere to be seen, and our hero felt a pang of pain wring his heart when he reflected that the mortal remains of the only original Joe Bowers were probably now being cremated by the devouring flames now raging so fiercely amid the ruins of the cabin.

"Poor Joe Bowers! he did not deserve to die such a death as this," Talbot exclaimed, regretfully, as he stood upon the bank of the river and gazed upon the devouring flames licking up so rapidly the substance of the once cosy cabin.

"You kin bet all your rocks on that, and you'll call the turn every time!" cried a voice which came, seemingly, from the clouds.

"See that you collect all my ashes, put 'em in a neat urn—an empty whisky demijohn would about fill the bill—sling a hefty verse or two in the funeral notice, say something arter this style:

"As squar' a man as ever flipped a card, always frisky;

Never went back on his beer, or refused good whisky."

"Say, better change that into 'Never refused any whisky, good or bad!'"

By this time Talbot had discovered the whereabouts of the veteran bummer.

A tall pine tree overshadowed the cabin, and the force of the explosion had sent the veteran whirling up into the air like a balloon; he had landed in the branches of the tree, and was not so dazed by this shock as not to be able to hold on for dear life.

He was blackened and begrimed by the powder, though, and looked more like a huge baboon than a human as he peered down from amid the branches of the pine.

"Bowers, I believe that you have more lives than a cat!" our hero exclaimed.

"Same to you, Dick Talbot, bully rook!" the bummer cried, "and I tell you it is a mighty lucky thing that we are fixed in that way, or else we would have been called upon to pass in our checks this time for a dead certainty."

"Have you escaped unhurt?"

"Well, I reckon so, although I'll own up that I have been almost scared to death."

"This hyer mine, fired by a durned taller candle, is the biggest kind of a surprise-party that I ever was invited to shake a leg at, and they'll never catch the ole, original Joe Bowers in sich a racket ag'in if the court knows herself, and she thinks she do."

"You had better get down out of that tree before the fire reaches it or you'll stand a chance to be roasted alive," Talbot continued.

"That's so; and like Captain Scott's coon, I'm the gentleman w'ot knows when to come down."

Luckily for Bowers the tree slanted away from the cabin so he was able to descend without suffering material damage, although he was forced to admit that the atmosphere was somewhat hotter than he liked.

"Durn me, if it ain't kind of a foretaste of the wrath to come," he remarked, when he reached *terra firma* and surveyed himself with a rueful face.

"If it's any hotter down below than it was in this hyer scrape, I jest want to be counted out afore I git in, and that's the kind of sugar I like in mine."

"Bowers, we have escaped death by a miracle," Talbot remarked, "and now the question is, are you and I men to tamely submit to such an outrage as this?"

"Not by a jugful!" the bummer replied, promptly.

"There isn't the least doubt in my mind that this death-trap was set for our express benefit."

"Nary doubt!"

"And by the hand of the same man, or men, who robbed us of our gold."

"All down but nine; set 'em up ag'in!"

By this observation the veteran wished to imply that in his opinion the conclusion drawn by the other was correct.

"And now, then, to whom are we indebted for this proceeding?" Talbot continued.

"I have made plenty of enemies in my time,

but I wasn't aware that there was a single one of them in this neighborhood."

"Ole pard, I don't believe that thar is a man, woman or child in this deestrick who has reason for wishing to git squar' with us."

"You hain't trod on nobody's toes, have ye?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Say, Dick, how will it do for to say that the cuss w'ot stuck a knife in Limber Bee is the head imp in this b'ilin?"

The words exactly voiced the thought that was in Talbot's mind.

"Well, Joe, old fellow, it does look as if the same man had a hand in both affairs," Injun Dick observed, thoughtfully. "And it is as deep and dark a mystery as I have ever known."

"The woman, Dick, ole pard? W'ot does it mean? Whar is she? Why ain't she to the fore?" Bowers questioned.

"I hate to say it, of course; but don't it look as if she had something to do with this devil's work?"

"Oh, I can't bring myself to believe it!" Talbot declared.

"But how kin you explain her absence in any other way?"

"I will not attempt to explain it; I hate to think about the matter!" Dick cried, impatiently.

"I had faith in the woman. She reminded me of an earthly angel that I loved and lost long years ago."

"That was the reason that, when I came across her, I went out of my way to help her to something better than the life she was leading."

"I s'pose you thought, old fellow, that I had a sneaking fondness for the woman, but as I am an honest man, and I believe, old pard, you think I am all that, I looked upon her in the light of a sister only."

"I thought I saw that there was much good in her, and I was willing to try to do all in my power to keep her from sinking into the grave or going down past all redemption in the depths of sin."

"And even now I am not willing to give up hope. I am far more willing to believe she is a victim than either a tool or a partner in the fiendish work, although I own I fancied I saw a glance of recognition pass between her and the old man who inquired the way to Murphy's Gulch."

"But I may be wrong about that. It may be that she has been decoyed away, fallen by the assassin's hand, and her bleeding body may now be lying in some mountain pass with its pale face upturned to the sky."

"But if she is alive—if she is a party to this terrible work, then, woman though she is, she must be made to feel that the way of the transgressor is hard, and that they who tread the path of sin follow a winding, devious road full of thorns."

"Limber Bee was our pard, Dick, and though he wasn't no great shucks of a feller, yet he was our brother and we are bound to avenge him!" Bowers observed.

"I will, I swear it on this blade that never yet proved false to me!"

And, acting on a sudden impulse, Talbot plucked forth his bowie-knife and kissed the shining blade.

Bowers followed his example, and the bright moon shining in wavy ripples on the surface of the polished blades witnessed the oath.

"Never will I know rest or peace until I hunt down and either slay with my own hands or give to justice the murderer of Limber Bee!" Talbot cried.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE TRAIL.

AND now that they had come to this determination, the pards held a brief consultation in regard to the best method to proceed to carry out their resolution.

They came to the conclusion that the first thing to be done was to notify Yampa City camp of what had taken place, and so they set out for that noted burg.

It was about three o'clock in the morning when they arrived at the town, and as there wasn't a sign of life they were forced to go into camp on the outskirts in a scrubby growth of pines until the morning came.

They had brought the mule with them, and Bowers was in a quandary as to how he could make matters satisfactory to the owner of the quadruped, for that useful beast had had his good looks materially damaged by the startling experience through which he had passed.

The hair was pretty well singed and the beast looked as if he had barely escaped with his life, although in reality he had not suffered any material harm.

"Better buy him," Talbot suggested. "We will need steeds; he seems like a good traveler, and now that he looks so badly you can probably get him cheap."

"Buy?" ejaculated Bowers; "w'ot with? wind? 'cos that's the best I kin do; gold and silver have I none!"

"Broke, eh?"

"Bu'sted flat as a pancake, and that is jest w'ot makes me hungry to get at the gore of the galoots w'ot went for the dust. I was a-counting on that for to rig me out like a gentleman. And I say, Dick, how can you foller up this hyer trail without spondulicks? It takes money to make the mare go, you know?"

"Rest easy on that score; it isn't often that I get clear down to bed-rock," Talbot replied. "I have a few hundred in my money-belt, and when that runs low, I must strike some sharps who think they can play poker, and so replenish the money-chest."

Bowers loudly expressed his admiration of the forethought of his pard, and then the two stretched themselves in the shelter of the trees and essayed to gain a little rest; for they knew that they had work ahead of them.

As soon as the town became awake Talbot and Bowers made their appearance, and told the story of the terrible death of Limber Bee and their own attempted assassination after the robbery of the cabin.

Business was instantly suspended, and a *posse* organized to look into the matter.

On the frontier, where the regular courts of law and police machinery do not exist, each man feels bound when any outrages occur to do his level best to detect and bring to speedy justice the doers of all evil deeds.

Talbot and Bowers told their story, and as both had suspected, public opinion ran all one way.

The unfortunate Alethea was universally believed to be in league with the guilty parties.

The most of the citizens held that there was only one man concerned in the matter, a lover of the woman, and that together they had planned the murder of Limber Bee, the plunder of the cabin, and then had fled.

Parties were dispatched in all directions to gain intelligence.

Suspicion was particularly directed against the unknown old man who had inquired the way to Murphy's Gulch.

There wasn't much doubt in the minds of the miners that the old man was no old man at all, but a young one in disguise, the confederate of the woman, and that her offer to accompany him so as to show him the way was but a clever device to get Talbot away from the cabin.

As time passed on, finding that she did not return, it was more than likely that Talbot would be led to go in search of her, and so leave the cabin unprotected, as actually happened.

By nightfall all the scouting-parties had returned, and though the stock of information which they had obtained was meager in the extreme, yet enough was gathered to confirm the miners in their belief that they had guessed the secret of the mystery.

No old man, or any stranger at all, had been near Murphy's Gulch on either the night of the tragedy, or the morning succeeding.

But a rancher who had a place in the foot-hills of the Cottonwood Mountains, some twenty miles south of Yampa City, down toward White river, reported that at an early hour somewhere around three or four o'clock, being troubled by an aching tooth so that he could not sleep, happening to sit smoking by his window, endeavoring to forget his pain, he had noticed two strangers, both young men apparently, and well mounted on "American horses," so called to distinguish the large horses brought from the East from the little native ponies, riding rapidly toward the south, and from the awkward way in which one of the cavaliers rode, he judged it was a woman in male attire.

The matter did not make any particular impression upon him at the time, and he probably would not have given it a second thought if the story of the murder and robbery, wherein a man and woman were believed to have a hand, had not been brought to his notice.

The town was unanimous in the belief that the true trail had been struck.

The fugitives had fled to the southward, and after coming to the White river they could either follow that stream down to its junction with the Green and find a refuge in some of the Utah towns, or they could keep straight on, cross the Cottonwood Mountains and follow the valley of the Rio Grande down into Southwestern Colorado.

But in the opinion of the town it did not matter much which way the fugitives had gone; so long as they were well mounted, well heeled with gold-dust, and had twenty hours' start, there wasn't the slightest chance of a pursuit proving successful.

All despaired of doing anything but Talbot and his pard, the fat bummer.

And neither one of these two either gave utterance to much hope in regard to the matter.

Talbot felt certain that the right trail had been struck, and he said quietly that it wouldn't do any harm for him and his pard to take a scout southward and see if they could pick up any further information.

So he disposed of his claim, and instead of buying the mule for Bowers, as he had intended, invested in two of the best horses he could find in the town, laid in a stock of such articles as his long experience told him would be necessary

on such a trip, and just after nightfall the two adventurers started.

They put up at the rancher's house that night and obtained from him all the information he possessed in regard to the fugitives.

Bright and early next morning they set out upon the trail.

Talbot had a good map of the country, and during the evening he had carefully examined it, aided by the rancher, who was an old hunter, and a man thoroughly posted in regard to all of Southwestern Colorado.

The conclusion reached by Talbot was entirely different from the guesses made by the towns-men.

But then he had some knowledge to aid him which they did not possess.

He did not believe that the fugitives would either flee into Utah or find a shelter in Southwestern Colorado.

Alethea came from the East; any acquaintance of hers would be apt to come from that direction, and in the event of flight it seemed to Talbot that the fugitives would be much more apt to attempt to seek concealment east of the mountains rather than west.

His idea was that the fugitives would, by way of the Gunnison valley, get into the heart of Colorado, then make their way to Pueblo and thence to the East.

After they took up the trail again he sounded Bowers as to his ideas on the point, and to his satisfaction discovered that the veteran had arrived at the same conclusion.

This was a good sign, in Talbot's opinion, for he had great faith in the judgment of the old original in a matter of this kind.

Nothing of moment transpired until the trackers got into the Gunnison region, and then in the neighborhood of Poncha Spring they got news of the fugitives.

Talbot had not neglected to inquire with due diligence of all he met in regard to the pair whom he was tracking so closely.

After getting so far away from the scene of the tragedy, the pair had apparently relaxed in their flight, and were disposed to take matters easy.

And then came a strange accident.

Amid the head-waters of the Arkansas, heading toward Pueblo, Talbot and Bowers absolutely got ahead of the fugitives, and were obliged to turn back.

This was unfortunate, for it warned the pair that a tracker was upon their trail, and they began to double like hunted hares.

"We'll have 'em soon, pard," Talbot observed to Bowers, with grim determination, when he discovered this fact.

The scent was growing hotter and hotter, and the trailers' blood was at fever heat, when one pleasant afternoon the pards came to the banks of the Arkansas, heading toward South Park.

The fugitives had now changed their route—had apparently given up all idea of making Pueblo, and were heading for Denver.

The trailers rode down to the ford, and as Talbot looked around him he could not help remarking to Bowers:

"What a capital spot for an ambuscade!"

"Beautiful!" exclaimed the bummer.

"If the party we are after had any disposition to show fight, I doubt if they could find a better place in all Colorado."

Hardly had the words left his lips when—

"Zip, zip, zip, zip!" sung the bullets in the air.

The horses reared in agony, and the two bloodhounds, clutching wildly at vacancy, fell from the backs of their steeds.

It was an ambuscade!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NAME

NEVER were men taken more completely by surprise, for neither Talbot nor Bowers had the slightest suspicion that a foe was near.

The thought that the spot afforded an excellent chance to plant an ambuscade was a natural one, but Talbot never even dreamed that the fugitives would be daring enough to attempt anything of the kind, although the murder of Limber Bee was a convincing proof that the doer of the deed was not a man who would hesitate at any crime.

But that the two would turn at bay and show fight was a wonder, and such an event had never entered into Talbot's calculations.

Now, too late, he perceived the reason for the fugitives' erratic course.

The head demon had been selecting a spot where he might be able to strike a deadly blow at his pursuers.

No better mode of stopping a pursuit could be devised than killing the bloodhounds, hot upon the trail.

The horses were mortally wounded by the deadly-aimed bullets, the riders also apparently dispatched, and, thinking the bloody work was consummated, out from the coverts where they had lain concealed, came the ambushed assassins.

There were four of them—four big and burly ruffians, armed to the teeth, fairly bristling with weapons.

But not one of the four bore any resemblance to the old man who had inquired the way to Murphy's Gulch and who was supposed to be the murderer of Limber Bee.

And it would have required a fertile imagination indeed to have fancied that any one of these burly men was the queenly Mrs. Beaverwick in disguise.

The smoke was still curling from the muzzles of the pistols in the hands of the ruffians when they made their appearance, and then set up a great shout of triumph as they looked upon the destruction which they had wrought.

"Durn me for a no-souled gopher!" cried the biggest man of the gang, a red-bearded ruffian who seemed to be the leader of the party, "if this ain't the cleanest and nicest leetle bit of business we have had our paws into for some time."

"You bet!" yelled the rest, in a sort of chorus.

"Earned the money easy, eh, boys?"

"Yes, yes," responded the others.

"Earned it without half trying, too. Cuss me! if I wouldn't like to run afoul of a job like this every day in the week," continued the red-bearded giant.

"Why, boyees, we could make enuff so we could all live like fighting-cocks; each man could set up a gin-mill of his own."

A burst of laughter greeted this sally.

"If we did that I reckon the proprietor would be the best customer," observed one of the gang.

And the rest agreed with the assertion.

"Well, boyees, let's finish up the job by going through the pilgrims. Their wealth ain't of no account to them now, and, maybe, it will do us some good."

This suggestion was received with decided approbation, and shoving their revolvers in the holsters which were belted to their waists, the ruffians sauntered to where the bodies of the victims lay.

The horses had been struck in vital parts, and already the animals had ceased to kick and lay motionless, gradually stiffening, chilled by death's cold hand. The humans were as motionless as the beasts, and the leader of the outlaws chuckled as he noticed the fact, and called the attention of his followers to it.

"Hey, boyees, do yersee them stiffs? Ain't it a neat bit of work? Darn me! ef I thought we were sich mighty good shots."

"I tell you wot it is, fellers, we must go in fur to make our mark the next time they call on the crack shots of Colorado to come to the frunt."

There was a general guffaw at this speech, for although each and every member of the band boasted of his ability in the shooting line, yet there wasn't one of them who did not secretly have doubts in regard to his abilities as a marksman.

Both Talbot and Bowers lay on their backs, just as they had fallen from the plunging horses, and in the right hand of each was a revolver.

In the first moments of the surprise both had grasped a weapon, but either the bullets of the foe or the plunging of the horses had dismounted them before they had a chance to use these tools.

"They are two nice-looking kids, ain't they?" cried the outlaw giant in mockery, as he strode up to the prostrate men.

"Ticularly the fat 'un. Look at the fat 'un! Ain't he a healthy looking corpus?"

"You bet!" cried the veteran bummer, abruptly, and as he spoke he discharged his revolver at the outlaw chief, sending that individual to his long account with the shortest shrift on record, for the bullet pierced his brain and he toppled over dead on the instant.

Talbot was equally as prompt to open fire, and two of the scoundrels fell before his bullets, one killed outright with a ball through his lungs, and the other mortally wounded with a shot in his head.

The fourth ruffian, dismayed by the fate of his comrades, started to run, all the fight completely taken out of him, but a bullet from Bowers' revolver brought him to the ground, disabled.

Both Talbot and Bowers were wounded, but not seriously, and simultaneously, without any consultation between them, each had decided upon playing the same game, the old 'possum trick.

By pretending to be dead the ambushed men would be drawn from their hiding-places, and the fight rendered decidedly more even.

As we have seen, the plan succeeded to a charm, and the defeat had been turned into a victory.

The biter had been bit with a vengeance.

The victors rose to their feet and proceeded to ascertain what damage they had received in the encounter.

"Well, you're not dead yet, Bowers," Talbot remarked, as he opened his shirt in order to ascertain the direction a ball had taken which had struck him in the side of the chest and from which he experienced considerable pain.

"No, sir-ee, but 'bout a dozen of the blamed bullets have scraped the bark offen me," the

veteran remarked, getting upon his feet. "And I want everybody to understand that I ain't the kind of man wot allows sich liberties to be taken with me by cusses that I ain't been introduced to."

The wound in Talbot's chest was not a serious one, although at present rather painful.

The ball had struck a rib and then glanced off.

A half-inch higher or lower, and Dick Talbot's career would have come to an untimely end.

Bowers had got off with a bullet through the fleshy part of his shoulder, an ugly flesh-wound, but nothing more.

"Bowers, we may thank our lucky stars for this escape!" Talbot exclaimed. "This has been the closest call that I have known for many a long day."

"No mistake 'bout that air, ole pard," replied the fat hummer, with a wise shake of the head. "But then you know thar's an old saying 'bout the man who is going to be hanged—"

"Can never be drowned, eh?" observed Talbot, finishing the sentence.

"Well, partner, I do not calculate to finish my career in either of those two ways, if I have any say about the matter."

"But let us examine these fellows and see if there's life left in any one of them."

"If there is, we may be able to get some information."

Only one of the three men had escaped instant death, the last one down, and he was severely wounded with a bullet in the shoulder.

He had fainted and just recovered consciousness when Talbot came up to him.

"This fellow has a chance for his life," Dick announced, taking the precaution to remove the man's firearms.

"Thank you for nothing," remarked the ruffian, with a sulky air, struggling to a sitting position and glaring at his conquerors.

"Tain't no fault of yours that I ain't ready to be planted."

"Respected pilgrim, as you commenced the fuss you ought not to complain," Talbot rejoined. "But now I want some information out of you. Who put up this little job—who set you cut-throats on to attack us?"

"Find out!" retorted the outlaw.

"I intend to. Bowers, rig a slip-noose in one of the lariats, put it around this fellow's neck, and then we'll run him up to a tree-limb."

"You bet!" responded the veteran, setting about the task with decided alacrity.

Bowers was an expert at this sort of thing, and it did not take him many minutes to adjust the noose and place it around the neck of the ruffian.

"Now then, let's see if there's any truth left in you!" Talbot exclaimed.

"Oh, you kin hang me if you like, but I won't speak!" the ruffian exclaimed, doggedly.

"Won't you? We'll see about that. Understand, if you will tell me what you know of this affair, I will give you a chance for your life!" Talbot said.

"You can walk all right, and can easily make your way to the nearest town, where you can have your wound doctored; the chances are that you will get over it. But if you don't speak, I'll hang you to this tree as sure as I am a living man!"

And then he made a signal to Bowers to give the lariat a tug.

The outlaw weakened.

"Spare me and I'll peach!" he cried. "The man that put up the job on you is an old crook; his handle is Malachi Everest, and he hails from New York."

"All right; take your life!" And then the two again took up the chase.

CHAPTER IX.

TRACKING THE PREY.

THE revelation made by the wounded outlaw satisfied Talbot that his surmise in regard to the fugitives was correct.

They were endeavoring to make their way eastward as fast as possible.

"In fact," Talbot remarked to Bowers, after they had resumed the pursuit and were pushing on toward Denver, "I don't think we would be very far out of the way if we headed straight for either Chicago or St. Louis without paying any attention to minor points."

"Our game is an Eastern man, and he feels out of place in this Western wilderness, and so he is making for his native jungle in the heart of a big city as fast as possible."

"Right ye air, me noble dook!" ejaculated the veteran. "But I say, Dick, don't you kinder reckon from this last leetle operation that this hyer cuss is a tiger, claws and all?"

"Oh, yes, there's no mistake about that. We have run into a king-pin of scoundrels. The manner in which he struck down Limber Bee proves that; but what puzzles me is why Alethea went with him so readily."

"What madness impelled this woman, who seemed to be thoroughly good at heart, to fly with the murderer of her husband and to reveal to him the secret hiding-place of our gold?"

"We had never wronged her; on the contrary aided her, and she always seemed to be grateful to me for the assistance I had rendered."

"It is the darkest mystery that I was ever mixed up with, and the more I think of it the more perplexed I become."

"We must go back into the past life of the woman to get at the rights of the matter; this cuss ain't no new acquaintance, and how kin anybody tell what power the feller has over her?" Bowers remarked. "If you remember, Dick, she was mighty close-mouthed about the past. Did you ever hear her say anything about her home or friends in the East?"

"Never."

"And yet she used for to let on once in a while that she had come from the East."

"Very true, and in the East we must look for a solution of the mystery."

Nothing of any moment befell the two pards on the way to Denver, and they reached that young metropolis of the mountains without getting any tidings of the prey upon whose trail they were pressing so hotly.

At Denver, Talbot sought the assistance of the justly far-famed chief of the Rocky Mountain police, General Cook.

In all probability there is not a man west of the Mississippi who has a better knowledge of the men who have defied the laws in the Western States and territories than the argus-eyed chief of the Denver police, and, too, his acquaintanceship with the leading outlaws of the East is tolerably extensive.

Talbot had heard a great deal of General Cook's sagacity and knowledge, and reasoned that if the man he sought was of any consequence in the outlaw world the acute police chief would be pretty apt to know something of him.

This reasoning was correct.

The wounded outlaw had kept faith with his captors and given them the true name of the man who had hired the outlaw gang to attempt the assassination of the miners.

Talbot explained the situation to General Cook, and that gentleman listened attentively.

"I know the man by reputation," General Cook remarked when Injun Dick had finished his story, "but I never happened to run across him. He has never operated in my district to my knowledge, although I have heard of him as far west as Chicago and through the Southern country to New Orleans."

"He is rather a prominent rascal then?" Talbot observed.

"Oh, yes, one of the leading lights among the crooks," the detective chief answered. "Although from the fellow's appearance one not acquainted with him would not be apt to imagine that he amounted to anything at all."

"He is a man of about forty who does not look to be over twenty-five. About the medium size, with a pleasant face and a remarkable talent for making a favorable impression upon strangers."

"A man of genius, evidently, who would be apt to succeed in almost any calling, and the best proof of the truth of this statement is the fact that, although he has been suspected of being mixed up with some of the biggest jobs on record, the getter-up and ringleader of the trick the police have never been able to secure proof enough against him to warrant his arrest."

"That is strange," Talbot remarked.

"It is the truth, and that is why I say the man is a genius. He is cunning enough to arrange the schemes so that his pals do the work while he remains in the background."

"Then if a job miscarried and the police came down on them, the tools were captured but the master-thief was never taken."

"But I should have thought some of his confederates, when they found they had to stand the brunt of the matter would have been inclined to turn State's evidence," Talbot suggested.

"Oh, that game was worked a dozen times, but the head demon had planned matters too shrewdly to be caught," the detective answered.

"No evidence, sufficient to warrant his arrest, was ever obtained, and though the police authorities of some of our largest cities are morally certain that this Malachi Everest has been the master-spirit of some of the biggest operations in the criminal line that have ever astounded honest men, yet none of them have ever yet had the satisfaction of snapping a pair of handcuffs upon his delicate wrists, or of safely stowing him away behind iron bars."

"And you may rest assured that if you succeed in trapping this king of rogues, you will have performed a feat that has never yet been accomplished by the smartest detectives in America."

"But, of course, there's no telling; you, a new man in the line, may be able to do the trick which has baffled all the old hands."

"I can try, anyway," Talbot replied, in his quiet way. "The smartest men make mistakes sometimes, and perhaps it may be my luck to catch this scoundrel tripping."

"It is my duty to make the attempt, for the murdered man was my pard, and although he was not a fellow calculated to win much love

or respect from his associates, yet I should be false to manhood if I didn't attempt to avenge his death."

"Oh, yes, I can understand that; you miners generally stick to one another like brothers," the police chief observed.

"Well, I'll do what I can for you, and if your man is in Denver, I'll be pretty apt to hear of him within four-and-twenty hours."

Talbot thanked the chief for his kindness, gave him his address so that word might be immediately sent to the hotel if any news was obtained, and then withdrew.

General Cook was as good as his word and put the secret police machinery in motion immediately, and the result was that inside of ten hours he notified the avenger that the man of whom he was in search, Malachi Everest, the "King of the Crooks," as some of his satellites were wont grandiloquently to term him, had passed through Denver, only stopping in the city for an hour or two, en route for the East.

New York, the chief suspected, was the objective point for this king of rascals.

"We must be off for New York, then, Joe," Talbot remarked to the veteran, after this intelligence reached them.

"All right, me royal nibs!" Bowers exclaimed. "It's many a long day since I have trod the pavements of the modern Babylon, but for all that I reckon I hain't forgot how the land lays."

"Nor I, although I have not been in New York since I was obliged to fly from the city like a thief in the night, and all for a rash blow struck in the hot impetuosity of youth."

"That foolish act made me an outcast from my home and kindred, and sent me to wrestle with the world in these Western wilds."

"No danger, I suppose, of any unpleasant consequences in case anybody thar happens to catch onto you, you know?" Bowers asked.

"Oh, no; that was twenty years ago, and about all the parties interested are in their graves."

"I declare, Bowers, when I look back to that time, when, as a beardless boy, I was obliged to flee for my life, and think what I have been through since, it makes me think that I am getting to be an old man."

"Nonsense! Dicky, my boy, if you look at things in that air way, how about your uncle?" Bowers observed. "Now, I'm old enough to be your father, and yet nary a cuss in this hyer world is big enuff for to make me own up to more than thirty or tharabouts."

It did not take the pards long to prepare for their Eastern trip, as they departed by the afternoon train.

Nothing of interest enough to warrant the detailing occurred on the trip until the journey was nearly over.

The two had passed through Philadelphia, and had entered upon the last hundred miles of their trip, when a young man who occupied a seat in front of the one in which the two pards sat, turned and addressed Talbot.

He was a slenderly built gentleman with a smooth face, and rather long dark-brown hair brushed behind his ears, which gave him a decidedly clerical appearance, which was enhanced by the fact that he wore a pair of light-blue glasses as though his eyes were weak.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said to Talbot, in a rather low and somewhat effeminate voice, "are you going to stop in New York?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind giving me a little information? I am a stranger in the city, and although I am ashamed to confess it, I am not much used to traveling."

"Happy to oblige you, sir," Talbot replied.

"Well, I am going to the city to complete my studies, and as I have no friends or acquaintances there, I am at a loss to know where to lodge. If you could direct me to a respectable yet reasonable hotel I should be much obliged."

"Well, we are not very well acquainted with the city, but we have been advised to put up at the Manhattan. It is a down-town lodging-house on the European plan. You pay for your room and get your meals where you like."

CHAPTER X.

IN NEW YORK.

THE stranger seemed to be delighted at the information, and thanked Talbot as though he had conferred a great favor upon him.

A rather soft young man the Western pards took this Eastern pilgrim to be; for without any encouragement on their part, he proceeded to give full particulars in regard to himself.

His name was William Smithers, and he came from a little hamlet up in the Pennsylvania coal region known as Avdenreid.

His father was a farmer of German descent; a man who had acquired a competency by the hardest kind of work and the sternest self-denial, and being ignorant himself, had determined that his only child should have a fine

education, and make his mark as a professional man.

Both father and son were undecided as to whether the latter would succeed best as a minister, a doctor, or lawyer, and so the young man had come to New York with the idea of ascertaining in which line he could most easily succeed.

During the recital, which came in a sort of gush from the stranger, Talbot had endeavored two or three times to gently insinuate that Mr. Smithers's affairs did not interest him in the least, and also that it was not the wisest thing in the world to make confidants of utter strangers.

And thereupon the young man put on a wise look, shook his head sagely, and remarked that although he had been brought up in a country town, the people and ways of a great city were as familiar to him as an oft-read book, and he further said with an air of supreme conceit that anybody who tried to fool him would have to get up very early in the morning.

"As green as grass," Bowers whispered to Talbot, as the young man settled back in his seat with an air of complete self-satisfaction.

"Dicky, ole pard, you kin bet a pile that some of these city sharps will play this cuss for a sucker afore he has been a week in the town."

"I shouldn't be surprised," Talbot answered. "And though, as a general rule, I believe it is only right to warn such a greenhorn of the danger he runs, yet in the present instance, I am satisfied that it would only be a waste of time, for smart Alects of this kind can only be taught by actual experience."

Despite the efforts of the two to choke off the self-conceited Mr. Smithers, he was disposed to be extremely friendly and occasionally favored them with hints of how best to avoid the traps and sharpeners so common to all large cities.

Of course there wasn't the least bit of originality in his ideas. They were only second-hand ones, evidently gleaned from the "New York correspondence" of the obscure country newspapers.

When they arrived at New York the three went to the hotel together, for Talbot hated to wound the self-esteem of the verdant young man by hinting that his room was better than his company.

It was a little after six in the evening when the travelers arrived in the city, and so by the time they had reached the hotel and arranged for their rooms it was dark.

Supper was then in order, and the three partook of the meal together, the two pards having by this time made up their minds that it was going to be a difficult matter to get rid of the young man from the country, so they determined to put up with the annoyance at present, resolved to give him the slip as soon as possible.

So after supper, when he suggested that it would be a good idea to take a walk up Broadway for the purpose of seeing some of the sights of a great city by gas-light, the pards declined on the plea that they were tired after their long journey.

Therefore Smithers was obliged to set out alone.

In truth the pards did intend to take a stroll, but they did not desire to be bothered by the young man's company.

Both were anxious to see what changes twenty years had made in the great metropolis.

Bowers was, like Talbot, an old New York boy, a Tenth-Warder, one of the "rounders" when the butcher-boys used to drive up Chrystie street until they "smelt blood," a saying that arose from the fact that the upper part of Chrystie street at that time was well supplied with slaughter-houses.

The pards went up Broadway as far as Sixth avenue, marveling at the changes that time had wrought, for it was a new metropolis that they beheld, not the city of their boyhood at all.

The Westerners, despite the strange sights that met their gaze, did not forget their frontier training, and kept a wary eye upon their surroundings, and after they had turned to retrace their steps to the hotel, Talbot remarked to Bowers:

"Joe, do you know it strikes me that we are being followed."

"Right you air, me noble dook," responded the veteran, who, in his neat, dark business suit, looked quite respectable. "I had my eyes on three cusses for some leetle time w'ot seem to be a-looking arter us in a very particular manner, and as I reckon that thar ain't any old friends of ourn who would be apt to recognize us, the thing looks kinder squally."

"Let's try a dodge on 'em and find out if we are the game they are after," Talbot suggested.

"Though I don't really see why anybody should trouble their heads about us."

"We don't look as if we would pan out particularly well."

"Show! you don't say so?" exclaimed Bowers with a disgusted expression.

"Well, now, to tell you the honest truth, I had an idea since I got rigged up in these togs that folks might take me to be old Vanderbilt or some other of them bloated bondholders."

"We'll take an omnibus and then see what game our men will try," Talbot said, abruptly,

for the persevering manner in which he was being dogged annoyed him.

A stage going down-town came along at that moment, and the two halted it and got in, and after they were seated in the vehicle they kept a close watch, without appearing to do so, however, upon the three individuals whom they suspected of shadowing their footsteps.

The suspicions of the pards were evidently not without foundation, for no sooner did the three men perceive the Westerners enter the omnibus than they hurried on ahead, hailed the stage a half-block further down, and while two got on the box with the driver, the third one entered the stage.

The three fellows were "toughs" in every sense of the word.

Muscular, thick-set ruffians, evil-eyed, beetle-browed scoundrels.

Three worse-looking rascals it would have been hard to find along the whole line of the frontier, as Bowers observed in an undertone to Talbot after the two by this device had convinced themselves that the men were playing the spy upon them.

"W'ot do you suppose they are arter, Dick?" he asked.

"Our valuables, I suppose, though how they could get the idea that we were pigeons worth plucking is a mystery."

"Say, ole pard, 'tain't possible, is it, that this is another job to get us out of the way like the ambush by the ford, engineered by the chap we air arter?" Bowers questioned, shrewdly.

"I hardly think that," Talbot replied, with a shake of the head. "It cannot be that the arms of this scoundrel are long enough to reach from the banks of the little Rio Grande in Colorado to the Atlantic seaboard."

"It is only a coincidence, that's all; but we'll have some fun with these fellows, for if they attempt to climb us, it will be like the school-boy tackling the hornets' nest."

Both of the Westerners were well armed: their revolvers were self-cockers and carried a ball big enough to "stop" a man if it hit him fairly, so they were not in the least afraid of an attack, although it did not hardly seem possible that the toughs would venture on such an experiment right in the open street.

Nor did they, for when, after riding a few blocks, the pards alighted from the stage and resumed their promenade down the street, the spies following at a safe distance in the rear, without manifesting any hostile intentions.

"Now let them jump us if they dare!" Talbot exclaimed. "But perhaps their game is to find out where we hang out," he continued, "and I'll be hanged if I don't block it, just for greens!"

The pards had now arrived in front of the Astor House, on lower Broadway, and Talbot had noticed in passing up the street that besides the main entrance on Broadway there was a side door on Barclay street.

So the two entered the house and quietly slipped out by the side door, thus completely baffling the spies, who were not on the lookout for such a trick.

After this movement was performed, the two proceeded directly to their hotel and retired to their room.

It was after eleven by this time and the pards prepared for rest.

"No danger of anybody jumping us in hyer, I s'pose!" Bowers remarked, with a dubious glance around.

The two had arranged to room together, and the apartment was a small one, not over ten feet square, with a single window looking out upon the roof of a building in the rear of the hotel.

The room was in the fifth story.

The door was fastened by an ordinary lock, and had a small bolt besides, and over it was a narrow transom-window.

"Not much security about that," Talbot remarked, examining the door, "and as it is our first night in strange quarters we'll camp down with our clothes on."

Bowers thought this a good idea, and so it was carried out.

Time passed on, the two men slept, and then, suddenly, Talbot awoke Bowers.

"Old pard, there's somebody at the door," he whispered.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ATTACK.

To a man like Talbot vigilance had become a second nature.

Long years of frontier experience had modified his nature so he had acquired the beast-like faculty of waking at the slightest sound.

His slumbers were as light as a cat's and he awoke as quietly and with as little trouble.

Bowers too was not a heavy sleeper, although no one who beheld the fat bummer wrapped in the arms of Morpheus, with his mouth open, and every sense securely bound in slumber's chain, would have been apt to believe that anything short of a first-class earthquake would have disturbed the veteran until tired nature was satisfied.

But, as all the old acquaintances of the original Joe Bowers will probably remember, the

veteran was a man who was not to be read by every stranger who ran across him.

The slight pressure of Talbot's hand upon his arm was sufficient to arouse him, and the whispered caution fell upon listening ears.

"All right, I'm awake for all I'm worth," Bowers replied, in the same cautious whisper.

There wasn't any moon, and therefore the room was plunged in utter darkness.

After Bowers had listened for a moment he became satisfied that Talbot's statement was correct; some one was tampering with the door, but the work was proceeding with such caution that it could hardly be heard.

But it was plain that there were people moving in the entry, and they were just outside the door.

"There's more than one," Talbot whispered to his companion, after he had listened intently for a moment.

"More'n two," Bowers replied.

The ears of the bummer were singularly acute, and after a few moments of careful observation Talbot became satisfied that this surmise was correct.

"You're right," he said; "there are three of them."

"Three of a kind ought to beat a single pair," Bowers observed; "but this hyer game I reckon they won't."

"Count our hand as two pair," Talbot suggested. "We are each of us equal to two ordinary men, and three of a kind won't beat two pair no way you can fix it."

Bowers would have indulged in a chuckle if the circumstances of the case had not forbidden such a luxury.

"W'ot are they up to?" the veteran whispered, after a minute or so had elapsed and no apparent attempt to force open the door had been made, although that the midnight prowlers were in the neighborhood of the door and were there for no good purpose both of the inmates were certain.

Then there came a peculiar sound to which Talbot called Bowers's attention.

"Do you hear that?" he asked.

"I do, for ducats!"

"They've got a small step-ladder or something of the kind, and by its aid are getting up to the transom."

"Right you air, and now w'ot is their leetle game?"

"That is a difficult question to answer, Joseph," the other replied.

The door was at one end of the room and the bed at the other, with its head against the wall in which the door was situated.

The frame of the transom was a small one, not over six inches wide, and being swung by pins in its middle it was an impossibility for any one to gain an entrance to the room through its aid.

"The space is too small to allow anything bigger than a monkey to pass through," Talbot continued.

"And it would be the biggest kind of a joke if they rung a monkey cold deal in on us," the irrepressible suggested.

From its position, too, it would be hardly possible for a marksman to take aim at us."

"'Tain't likely that galoots of this hyer kidney will try for to burn any gunpowder," Bowers remarked. "The pistol game makes altogether too much noise."

"What are they up to, then?" Talbot queried, puzzled by the singular circumstance.

"Mebbe they are trying for to get a look at us for to see how the land lays."

"That is hardly probable, and if it is, the trick can't be worked, for from the position of the transom it is not possible for any one to look through it from the outside and get a view of the bed."

Then to the ears of the listeners came the sound of the transom-frame being moved.

It was stiff from long neglect and did not move readily.

"Well, we shall soon know what they are up to," Talbot remarked.

"Got your shooting-irons ready?"

"You bet!" Bowers responded.

"I reckon we'll be able to give these sharps a surprise party that they little expect," Talbot remarked.

"Right you air, mighty satrap, and I say, Dick, do you reckon these pilgrims are the three who were so durned inquisitive 'bout us on Broadway to-night?"

"I think it is more than probable. I reckoned we had given them the slip, but they have managed to strike in on our trail again."

"Say, Dick," said Bowers, abruptly, as a sudden thought occurred to him. "Do you s'pose that soft galoot w'ot picked us up on the train has had anything to do with this racket?"

"It's rather strange, Joe, but my thoughts were running on that young man just as you spoke and I begin to believe that it was a 'plant,' and that instead of his being a flat we were green to give him any information in regard to our plans."

"Dick, folks generally think that California and the Rocky Mountains mining region are pretty hard places for strangers who ain't accustomed to the people nor their ways, but from

this hyer racket to-night it strikes me that New York is 'bout as dangerous a wilderness as a man kin git lost in."

"It certainly appears like it. Hallo! what's that?"

The exclamation was caused by a pungent odor which suddenly pervaded the atmosphere of the apartment, and at the same time a fine mist began to fall upon the faces of the two.

"Going to kill us with kindness, eh, Dick?" Bowers suggested. "Squirting cologne onto us, kinder preparing the lamb for the sacrifice."

"I hope these galoots ain't the same bad-looking crowd w'ot wa: arter us on Broadway," the veteran added, reflectively.

"Why so?"

"'Cos I would like to start my Eastern graveyard with better-looking men."

"Chloroform!" said Talbot abruptly, now penetrating the design of the midnight prowlers.

"Upon my word, we must have run into the biggest kind of an outfit for such a game as this to be tried on us."

"Don't you see the dodge, Joe? By means of the transom and a syringe with a fine rose on the end of it, the drug can be deposited on our faces until we are lulled into insensibility, and then it will be an easy job to get into the room and get away with us."

"It's a bully plan and would be apt to make the rifle ninety-nine times out of a hundred, but we're Injuns and don't count."

"Whew! ain't the stuff strong? Say, Dick, if this keeps on we shall smell worse than a couple of pole-cats."

"We must get out of this, for it's getting too strong to be pleasant. Can you get up quietly and get to the corner of the room furthest from the window without making any noise?"

"You bet! a cat is a fool to me when it comes to a dodge of that kind."

"Go it, then."

With the utmost caution the two crept from the bed to the floor, and as noiseless as a pair of unquiet ghosts, made their way to the corner of the room indicated by Talbot.

It was right behind the door, and as they took the precaution to creep across the floor close to the wall, it was impossible for any one peering through the open transom, to either detect the maneuver or discover the inmates of the room after the movement was accomplished.

"Now, then, I think we have got the dead-wood on them," Talbot remarked.

"Yes, sir; we have the biggest kind of a bulge."

Hardly were the two safe in their new quarters when there was a movement on the part of the men without.

They evidently believed the stupefying drug had produced its accustomed effect and lulled the senses of the supposed sleepers into a stupor so dense that they could not be awakened by ordinary means.

And now that the inmates of the room were disposed of, they were about to effect an entrance to the apartment.

By means of a pair of "nippers" as the strong pincers used by experienced burglars are called, the key in the inside of the lock was turned from the outside, and from the transom, with a stout wire, the bolt of the door was shot back.

The pards watched these proceedings with a great deal of interest, and from the ease and celerity with which the trick was achieved, got a good idea of the accomplished manner in which the expert Eastern "cracksman" performs his work.

The door opened noiselessly and dark figures stole into the room.

"I believe there's four of them instead of three," Talbot whispered to Bowers; he was judging by the sound of the footsteps, for it was too dark to distinguish the forms of these nocturnal visitors.

"We've got em' dead to rights," said a hoarse voice.

"Oh, yes, the job has been worked to perfection," replied another, in tones that both the pards instantly recognized.

It was the open-mouthed Mr. Smithers who spoke.

"Make an end to both of them by strangling," he continued, "and be careful not to leave any more marks than possible."

"Then turn on the gas, so it will look as if they blew it out and were suffocated by it during the night. These fellows will furnish a good item for the newspapers to-morrow. More greenhorns dead through blowing out the gas."

CHAPTER XII.

A REVELATION.

"W'ot a cold-blooded cuss," Bowers whispered in Talbot's ear. "Durn my buttons if he don't go ahead of any Western rustler that I ever run across, and who would have thought it of sich a durned innocent cuss who looked as green as grass, and talked as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth?"

"Yes, he did rather play it on us, but I reckon we will return the compliment and turn the tables on him in a way that he will despise in a minute or two," Talbot replied, in the same cautious tone.

"Cap, hadn't we better turn on the glim so as to be able to see w'ot we are about?" asked one of the intruders.

"Yes, strike a match and light the gas," replied the soft-spoken youth whom the pards had known by the name of Smithers, thus revealing the fact, which the two had previously suspected, that he was the leader of the party.

"You need not be afraid of waking our birds, for their next waking will be in the other world, and I've no doubt that they will be very much astonished to find themselves there," the young man continued.

"But that is the way we do business in the East, and these Westerners who are not smart enough to be up to our tricks, ought not to venture amid the jungles of civilization."

The rest of the gang chuckled hoarsely at this observation.

"They think it is a most excellent joke now, but they may have reason to change their minds the moment the gas is turned on," Talbot whispered in Bowers's ear.

"You bet!" responded that worthy.

One of the gang struck a match and lit the gas.

And the moment the light flashed forth, the tableau revealed was certainly a striking one.

Rising to their feet, just as the light dispelled the darkness, with their leveled revolvers the two pards "covered" the intruders, who were clustered by the open door.

As the two had anticipated, the three ruffians with Smithers, were the same fellows who had dogged their footsteps in Broadway.

The midnight marauders were taken at a most decided disadvantage.

Not one of them displayed any arms, and they gave a gasp of astonishment as they glared upon the Westerners.

"How are you?" quoth Talbot. "Quite a surprise-party, isn't it?"

"You didn't give us the proper warning that you intended to call, but we are ready to receive you all the same."

"We children of the frontier, the sons of the wilderness, may not be quite up to the dodges of you Eastern sharps, but for all that, you can bet all you are worth that it is a cold day when we get left."

"Yes, that is the kind of hair-pins we air," Bowers chimed in.

"Pilgrims, you will please to observe that we have got the bulge on you in the worst kind of way," Talbot continued. "These seven-shooters are self-cockers, and both my pard and myself are dead-shots."

"We haven't attended an Eastern funeral for years, and are rather curious to see if you plant people here now the same as you used to, so if you are not wise enough to surrender quietly, we'll be apt to plug you for keeps."

If ever baffled, impotent rage distorted human countenance, it had full play now.

But the leader of the gang for all his youthful appearance and apparent greenness was evidently a man of desperate resolution and determined ways.

It was he who had lit the gas, and his hand yet lingered on the cock of the burner, and just as Talbot concluded his speech, evidently realizing that every word the Westerner had uttered was true, and the tables had been turned in the most complete manner, he, with a single movement of his thumb and finger, extinguished the gas, and again the room was plunged into utter darkness.

"Run for your lives, boys!" he cried.

He had come to the conclusion that discretion was the better part of valor, and as there wasn't any hope of getting the best of the well-armed pards in an open fight, to retreat as fast as possible was the only alternative.

"If you attempt to move, we'll fire!" cried Talbot, sternly.

Our hero was not prepared for this trick, and was, in a measure, surprised by it.

He hated to open fire on men who, instead of making an attempt to fight for their lives, were trying to get out of the scrape in which they had involved themselves by taking to their heels in the most cowardly manner.

True, they were nothing but a set of dastardly murderers, and deserved to be put to death, yet for all of that, bold Injun Dick had no mind to act as their executioner.

His words of warning, however, did not have the effect which he had anticipated, for instead of stopping the stampede they only added to it.

It went against the grain to fire upon the fleeing scoundrels, yet reflecting that it was his duty to wing one or two of them, so that in the grip of the law they would be forced to reveal why it was that the murderous attack had been made, Talbot discharged his revolver, and Bowers, who had come to a similar conclusion, followed suit.

The yells of agony that followed the shots proved conclusively that one if not both of the bullets had found a billet.

Talbot sprung to the gas, and striking a match, illuminated the apartment.

Now that one or two of the murderous band had been secured, he hated to continue the attack, for it seemed to him too much like murder to pursue defenseless, fleeing men, although there wasn't any doubt that they richly deserved to die.

By the time the gas was turned on all of the ruffians had disappeared in the darkness of the corridor, with the exception of one unfortunate fellow who had been unlucky enough to receive a revolver-ball in the thigh that rendered locomotion impossible.

He had gone down all in a heap in the entry just outside the door, and was cursing his ill-luck in the most savage fashion.

It was not "Mr. William Smithers," as Talbot had been uncharitable enough to wish when he had heard the yells of pain which indicated that one of the bullets had taken effect.

The wounded man was a young tough with a most forbidding countenance, and the way in which he cursed Talbot when that gentleman approached him was enough to make the hair of godly men stand on end.

Injun Dick had heard some wild and whirling words in his time, but amid all the wild scenes of the West he had never encountered a ruffian who could outswear this desperado.

Talbot was quick to act.

He realized that it would be only a waste of time to attempt to parley with such a foul-mouthed scoundrel, and so after a hasty glance along the corridor to satisfy himself that there wasn't any chance of overtaking the retreating ruffians, he went up to the prostrate man and clapped his revolver to his head, just as if he intended to blow out the fellow's brains upon the instant.

This was a move that the other had not anticipated, and he literally trembled with fear, the blood forsaking his face until it was as white as a sheet.

"For Heaven's sake don't murder me in cold blood!" he whined, in the most abject state of fear.

"I've got my death-wound now, and if you've any heart in your breast you might let a man die in peace, and give him time to say good-by to his friends."

"Much time you intended to give us, you infernal scoundrel!" Talbot replied, both voice and face stern, no trace of mercy to be discovered in either.

"It wasn't me," the fellow protested. "I hadn't anything ag'in' you. I only came with the rest of the gang."

"Exactly, and now you must suffer for being in bad company."

And Talbot pressed the cold muzzle of the revolver against the temple of the trembling rough.

"Mercy, mercy!" he pleaded. "I didn't know what they were a-going to do. The Cap said there was fun afoot, and so I had to come in with the others. I ain't got anything ag'in' you. Why should I have? You're a stranger to me, I never saw you afore."

"You lie, you scoundrel!" the other replied, promptly. "You dogged the footsteps of myself and friend on Broadway to night. You needn't attempt to lie out of it, for I caught you at the trick."

"It was the boss's orders, and I had to do as I was told," the man protested.

"That's a lame excuse!" Talbot exclaimed, contemptuously. "How do I know that you are not the boss?"

"Oh, I swear to you that I ain't."

"You kin believe every word he says, Dick," Bowers observed, sarcastically. "He's a Sunday-school man, he is."

"Was the captain, as you call him, here to-night?"

"Yes."

"The young fellow with the smooth face and the long hair, who calls himself William Smithers?"

"That's the boss, though I don't know what name he's a-traveling under."

"What is his true one?"

The man hesitated, and Talbot perceiving it, put the screws on him at once.

"Give me his name or I'll blow your brains out on the instant!" he cried, in determined accents.

"There isn't a chance for you to escape instant death except by speaking. Give his name and I'll let you go free."

"He'll kill me if I squeal on him," the man whined.

"I most certainly will kill you if you don't, so you can take your choice."

The fellow saw that Talbot was thoroughly in earnest and so whimpered out:

"He's the Cracksman King, Malachi Everest."

Both of the pards were surprised, for though they had surmised that this bitter attack upon them was probably inspired by the man upon whose trail they were pressing so hotly, yet they did not guess they had come in direct contact with him.

Hardly had the revelation been made when there came a yell of "Fire!" from the lower

part of the house, and almost at the same moment a column of smoke came rolling up the stairway.

The hotel was in flames.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

THE first thought of the pards was that the desperadoes, having failed in their well-planned attack, had determined to compass the death of the men whom they had tried to murder, by setting fire to the house, and so it was but natural for Bowers to exclaim;

"The galoots have fired the shanty!"

"No, no!" cried the wounded man, who was terribly alarmed at this new turn of affairs, "that wasn't in the programme at all, and there hasn't been time for 'em to do it, either."

"It is probably an accident and I'm afraid it's going to be an ugly one for us," Talbot remarked "for the stairway seems to be on fire, and if it is, our escape is cut off."

"And we'll be roasted like a lot of rats!" Bowers exclaimed.

The wounded man shivered. He was not prepared to view the gloomy prospect with the same degree of calmness as the two Westerners.

"We can git out by the fire-escape!" he cried.

"The fire-escape!" exclaimed Talbot.

This was a new wrinkle to him, for in the days when he knew the great city there wasn't anything of the kind known.

"Yes, didn't you notice the iron balconies on the front of the house?—there's ladders leading from one to the other."

"Oh, yes."

Now that the fact was recalled to Talbot's mind he remembered that he had noticed the extremely ugly pieces of ironwork which disfigured rather than adorned the front of the hotel.

"Don't leave me here to be burnt up now that I have given you a pointer!" the wounded ruffian pleaded.

"Certainly not," Dick replied, "although I reckon I'm only saving you for the hangman."

"I'll take my chances on that!" the fellow observed, grimly.

The smoke was increasing in volume and the crackling of the flames raging in the lower part of the house could now be quite distinctly heard.

The alarm had reached the street, and the cries of the mob gathering without rose on the air.

The pards assisted the wounded man to his feet and hurried with him to the front window in the entry.

The scoundrel was game, for though the slightest movement gave him exquisite pain, yet he never even murmured, but with firm-set teeth checked the inclination to groan so strongly felt.

Raising the window-sash the three made their way to the balcony, and hardly had they accomplished the movement when they were joined by half a dozen more fugitives, more or less dressed, who had been roused from their slumbers in so unceremonious a manner.

Unreasonable as was the hour, yet the street seemed to be filled with people, all yelling and shouting at the top of their lungs.

Then came the rush of the steam fire-engines through the crowd, accompanied by the hook-and-ladder brigade, and in a wonderfully short space of time the firemen were clambering up the front of the building.

Thanks to the precaution that the pards had taken of retiring without removing their clothes, and to the timely warning they had received of the fire, they were enabled to make their escape from the burning building without suffering the loss of a single article.

The wounded ruffian improved the opportunity to bestow a parting caution upon the Westerners as the firemen came swarming up the front of the building.

"You fellers have done me a good turn," he said, "and I bear no malice 'cos you plugged me. I s'pose I would have done the same if I had been in your place. Don't peach on me now, and I'll give you another pointer. I'm going to tell the firemen that I've jest got off a sick bed, and get 'em to help me down and carry me off to a hospital."

"Don't blow on my little game, and I'll give you a pointer that will be worth having."

"All right; we'll keep dark. We don't want to push you to the wall," Talbot replied.

"Look out for Everest!" the man warned.

"I ain't posted as to what is between you and him, but the King of the Cracksmen has sworn to have your life, and he's jest like a bloodhound when he strikes in on a thing of this kind."

"He's one of the kind of men w'ot is a slave to his word, and from w'ot I've heard him say 'bout you, I reckon he will risk his neck to cut you in the heart with a knife, or to put a revolver ball through your brain."

By this time the firemen had gained the balcony, and the man was forced to stop.

The Westerners made their way to the street without any trouble, while the firemen, deceived by the plausible tale of the wounded ruffian, assisted him to descend.

Although the firemen worked with the greatest energy, the interior of the hotel was completely destroyed by the fire.

The pards stood in the street just outside the fire-lines and watched the flames for an hour or so, and then departed to seek shelter in a hotel away up-town.

It was Talbot's idea to get a good distance from the scene of his late adventures.

It was plain to him now that the task he had taken upon his shoulders was no light one, and although he had taken part in many a desperate undertaking in his time, this present enterprise promised to test his courage and skill to the utmost.

While they were standing and gazing at the fire, he had suggested to Bowers that it would be a good move to seek new quarters in some remote locality, so that it would be difficult for the desperado of whom they were in search to hit upon their trail.

"This fellow is no slouch, Joseph, my boy," Talbot had said, in conclusion, "for I tell you the man who could pull the wool over the eyes of two such old stagers as you and I in the extremely neat manner that this apparently guileless youth did the trick, is not to be met with every day."

"You kin bet every ducat you ever had or ever hope to ketch onto on that!" responded the veteran, decidedly.

"Oh, I tell you, me noble Roman, this galoot is clean 'way up at the top of the heap, and we have got to play the finest kind of a game, or the first thing you know he will clean us for all we are worth."

"We are going to win, Joe, or else we'll leave our bones in this hyer Eastern land," Injun Dick replied, in a tone of quiet determination.

Standing in front of the pards was a stout, elderly citizen, comfortably clad, evidently a man of substance.

He had a good face, and Talbot, after studying the stranger for a moment, came to the conclusion he would be able to rely upon any information he might obtain from him.

So he accosted the stranger, explained that he had been one of the inmates of the burning hotel, and asked if the other knew of any place up-town that he could recommend.

The citizen happened to be well posted, and advised Talbot to try a certain hotel on Forty-second street in the neighborhood of the Grand Central Depot.

"Take the Third-avenue 'L' road at City Hall, and you will save time," the gentleman said, in conclusion.

Talbot thanked him, then in company with Bowers, made his way through the crowd.

Straight to the City Hall station of the "L" road the pards proceeded.

On the way they naturally fell to discussing the situation.

"Well, Joe, the fellow has made three desperate and determined licks at us, and slipped up every time," Talbot remarked.

"Right you air, and according to all calculations we ought to have been wiped out every time, but the trick didn't work, somehow."

"Yes, the mine when it exploded in the cabin and demolish'd the house ought to have blown us into a hundred pieces, then the ambushed scoundrels at the ford should by good right have fairly riddled us with their bullets, for fairer targets marksmen never had."

"And then to-night it was dollars to cents that the gang would get away with us."

"Fact, sure as you're born."

"So far we have had altogether the best of the fight, although we are at the disadvantage of working in the light while our adversary is hidden behind a cover and is striking at us from the darkness."

"We are in the East now, and our Western ways will not answer here, and we must fight our man in his own fashion, or in the long run he will be apt to get the best of us."

"Now as this fellow is a criminal and a shining light in the fraternity, we must get the aid of some keen and cunning detective so as to be able to meet the scoundrel at his own game."

"You bet!" responded Bowers.

"The first move for us to make then, is to secure the advice of the best detective we can fasten to. I noticed in the newspaper this morning that there were half a dozen men advertising in that line, and right after breakfast we'll make a tour of investigation."

Bowers approved of the idea, and by this time the City Hall station of the Elevated Railroad was reached.

The pards did not have long to wait for a train, only about five minutes, but in that brief time they imagined they found themselves on the heels of another adventure.

There were few passengers on the platform when they arrived, and three of them in particular attracted the attention of the Westerners.

One was a tall, muscular man, with a lion-like head and an eagle eye, well dressed, and with the air natural to men used to command.

He was pacing slowly up and down the platform, evidently in deep thought, and taking very little heed of his surroundings.

The other two were in company, a pair of swarthy-faced, foreign-looking men, rather poorly-dressed, who kept in a dark corner and appeared to be watching the well-dressed gentlemen.

"Those fellows are up to some mischief," said Talbot to Bowers after he had called the attention of the veteran to the two, and they had watched them for a while. "I think we must be counted in."

So while the two watched the well-dressed stranger, the pards dogged them in turn.

At Thirty-fourth street the gentleman left the car, so did the others, and the Westerners followed like sleuth-hounds.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

AT Thirty-fourth street, the branch of the Elevated roads which goes to the Thirty-fourth street ferry joins the main line and, as a natural consequence, there are always quite a number of passengers getting on and off.

And, although the hour was an unseemly one, yet on this occasion there were half a dozen passengers who left the train besides the persons whose footsteps we are following, and as many more got on, so it was not a difficult matter for the two pards to track the others without exciting attention.

Then, too, the swarthy-faced men were so intent upon the game they were playing—so absorbed in dogging the well-dressed gentleman, that they did not pay the slightest attention to anything else.

That some one should try to play the same game upon them that they were indulging in, was an idea that never entered their heads.

The stranger, evidently, was not going to the ferry, for he descended the stairs which led to the street, and at a safe distance behind came the two watchers.

Talbot and Bowers followed right on the heels of the strangers, for, as Dick observed to the veteran:

"If we loiter behind and these fellows happen to notice it, the fact may make them suspect that we have tumbled to their little games; while if we are right after them, as we naturally would be under the circumstances, and they chance to notice us, their suspicions will not be excited."

Bowers saw the soundness of this reasoning, and so expressed himself.

While the two had been watching the progress of affairs in the car during the passage, they had indulged in considerable speculation in regard to who and what the well-dressed stranger might be.

There was something about him which to their well-trained eyes indicated he was no common man.

"He's a feller clear way up to the top of the heap, and don't you forget it!" Bowers remarked.

"There is a sort of an erect military bearing about him, and I should not be surprised if he was some distinguished soldier," was Talbot's conclusion.

And the pards had discussed, too, the motives which urged the foreign-looking men to dog the footsteps of the other.

They did not look like footpads, for they did not appear to be ordinary ruffians, although rather poorly dressed, and it seemed improbable that plunder was their object.

And then, too, although the man whom they were dogging was well dressed, yet he did not display any costly jewelry upon his person.

No diamonds, no elaborate watch-chain, indicating that a hundred and fifty or a two hundred dollar time-piece reposed in his vest-pocket.

No outward display at all calculated to attract the attention of the midnight marauder.

"Say!" exclaimed Bowers, after the two had cogitated over the matter and discussed it in all its bearings. "It looks to me as if these two galoots air jest the kind of sharps who would be apt to go fur a man out of revenge—to git hunk with him, you know."

Talbot agreed with the keen-sighted, quick-witted veteran, who was about as good a judge of human nature as could be found in the metropolis.

There was a world of evil meaning in the threatening glances which the two ever and anon bestowed upon the stranger when they fancied that no one observed them, for the two Westerners played their parts so well that the spies never for a moment imagined any one in the car had perceived their little game.

The gentleman proceeded up Third avenue until he came to Thirty fifth street, into which he turned, heading toward the East river.

He went straight on, apparently deeply absorbed in thought—a sort of brown study, for he never turned his head nor seemed to take the least interest in the surroundings.

The street was dark and deserted, not a soul moving in the block with the exception of the

well-dressed gentleman, the foreign-looking men skulking after him stealthily and now rapidly approaching, and the two pards, who were stealing upon the shabbily-dressed men just as rapidly, and just as noiselessly as they were proceeding.

Though from all outward appearances this seemed to be the prelude of a tragedy, yet it had a rather comical aspect.

The stealthy men creeping upon the stranger, who was totally unsuspecting of what was taking place behind him, and the Western pards stealing upon them, equally as unsuspecting as the stranger.

Soon the climax came.

When the stranger was about in the middle of the block, the two men closed in rapidly upon him.

Long knives glittered in the air.

The stranger, now warned of his danger, made an attempt to meet it.

He turned and thrust his hand into the bosom of his vest as if to draw a weapon, but his assailants were too close upon him, and the long, keen knives would surely have been buried in his breast had it not been for the two pards.

Their revolvers were ready, and as the attack on the stranger was so sudden that it was impossible for them to aid him without using them, they did not hesitate.

The two shots were fired so nearly at the same time that there was but one report.

Both of the bullets struck home.

Down went the two assassins right at the feet of their intended victim.

By this time the stranger had his revolver out, and he seemed entirely at his ease, notwithstanding his narrow escape from threatening dangers.

"Well, what kind of a little surprise party do you call this, anyway?" he exclaimed.

And then stepping forward he peered into the faces of the fallen.

"Oho! it is my Italian friends," he continued. "I knew that they had threatened to take my life, but I have heard so much talk of that kind without any deeds to back it up that I didn't take the least bit of stock in it."

"Well, these fellows were not only barking dogs, but biting ones as well," Talbot remarked, as he and Bowers advanced and gazed upon the bodies of the prostrate men.

"I may thank you for my life!" the other observed, casting an inquiring glance at the two pards, "and though I'm not the kind of man much given to professions of gratitude, yet I will say I duly appreciate the favor, and any time I can requite the obligation by risking my life in your service I shall be glad to do it."

"Oh, that's all right," Talbot replied, carelessly. "My friend and I happened to see that these two fellows were disposed to climb you without warning, and so we took a hand in the game."

"Well, you played trumps," the other said, dryly. "If I'm not mistaken, these two fellows have 'passed' and are out of the game."

It was true; the assassins who had so deliberately planned to murder the stranger without giving him a chance for his life were past all mortal aid.

One was dead and the other dying.

"Two as black-hearted villains as ever trod the streets of New York," continued the stranger, "and they richly deserve the fate they have met, although in the interests of justice it is to be regretted that the hangman has been spared a job."

"But come, we had better get away before any one finds out that we have been mixed up in this matter, and so save ourselves a lot of unpleasant notoriety."

"That's so," Talbot remarked, admiring the forethought of the stranger. "Neither of us are anxious to pose in public, and although we are not to blame for killing these ruffians, yet, as we are strangers in the city, we might have some difficulty in making it appear so."

As they conversed the three crossed to the opposite side of the street and continued on down the block.

The pistol-shots had not attracted any particular attention, for at such an untimely hour there were few people abroad and the vigilant guardians of the night, the ever-watchful policemen, rarely trouble themselves about such a trivial thing as the discharge of a weapon unless accompanied by cries for assistance and the noise of a struggle.

Not a soul did the three encounter until they were a couple of blocks from the scene of the tragedy, and then they came across a sleepy-looking metropolitan policeman, who had evidently been taking a nap in some quiet corner.

He glared suspiciously at the three as they passed, but evidently had not been alarmed by the reports of the revolvers.

"Now we are all right," the stranger remarked, after they had got by the policeman. "We are too far from the scene of the tragedy to be identified with it, and the wonder-loving souls of great Gotham will have a chance to puzzle their brains over another metropolitan mystery to-morrow, for the death of these two

Italians will create a stir, for they were two well-known men and wielded a powerful influence in the Italian quarter.

"They were a couple of the sons of sunny Italy who had left their country for their country's good."

"In Italy they had followed brigandage for a living until their crimes made the country too hot to hold them, then they fled across the sea and entered upon a new career."

"They had not been in this country six months before they became a terror to all the rest of their countrymen, upon whom they levied blackmail in the most unscrupulous manner."

"If the selected victim refused to pay, he was threatened with the dagger."

"I happened to get upon their track and materially interfered with some of their little games. As a rule, I generally keep my eyes open, but they caught me napping to-night, for I was busy in thought and did not notice what was going on around me. A man in my line is usually wide awake. I am in the detective business, gentlemen, and my name is Joe Phenix."

CHAPTER XV.

THE AGREEMENT.

THE name was not strange to Talbot, for even in the wilds of the West he contrived to keep pretty well posted in regard to what went on in the East, and he had often read accounts of the detective's bold exploits, and now, by a lucky chance, he had made the acquaintance of the man of all men who would be most likely to afford him valuable aid.

And fortune, too, had favored Talbot by giving him a claim upon the detective.

"I've often heard of you through the newspapers, Mr. Phenix," Talbot remarked, "and I assure you it affords me great pleasure to make your acquaintance, and I regard it as being particularly fortunate that I was able to be of service to you to-night."

"I can thank you for my life, and, as I said before, you can command my aid at any time you may require it," the detective answered, warmly.

There wasn't any mistaking the sincerity of the speech, for the man's heart was evidently in his words.

"My name is Talbot—Richard Talbot, and I am from the Rocky Mountain region, and have come to the East on a particular bit of business in which I fancy you can be of great assistance to me."

"Command me, and I will do all I can for you," Phenix replied, immediately, and then he halted and called the attention of his companions to a small brick house before which they stood.

"This is my ranch, gentlemen, as you Western men would say, and it will give me great pleasure if you will take up your quarters with me while you are in town."

The invitation was accepted in the same frank spirit in which it was given, and ten minutes later found the three comfortably ensconced in the detective's sanctum.

"Now, then, unfold your tale and let me know how I can serve you," said Phenix.

Talbot began at the very beginning and related all that had occurred since he and the Beaverwicks came together.

Phenix listened with the utmost attention, and when the tale was finished sat silent for a few moments deep in thought.

At last he spoke.

"I do not know exactly what to make out of the affair," he said.

"I know this Malachi Everest very well indeed. I have got after him a half a dozen times, but the fellow has always managed his tricks so cleverly that I never yet have had the pleasure of snapping the steel bracelets upon his wrists."

"Murder is not at all in his way; not that he would hesitate a moment to commit such a crime, provided the necessity was urgent enough to sanction it, but he would be very apt to shift the job on somebody else's shoulders if he could."

"That is the way in which he works all his tricks and explains why it is so hard to trap him. He does all the head-work—all the planning, for which he invariably gets the lion's share of the spoils, but I never knew him to take an actual part in any affair."

"But the evidence seems to point plainly to him as the doer of the deed," Talbot urged.

"Yes, if the information you received from the ruffians was the truth," observed the detective, shrewdly.

"But a man is not generally safe in taking much stock in their yarns. Long experience has convinced me that in nine cases out of ten one of these rascals caught in a tight place will be much more apt to attempt to get out of it by lying than effect his escape by telling the truth."

"They seem to take a malicious pleasure in hoodwinking the officers of justice as much as possible, even when it would be decidedly to their advantage to tell the truth."

"Do you think that these men deceived me?" Talbot asked.

"It is hard to say. I haven't solid ground enough upon which to base an opinion. I can only conjecture, and I may be wide of the truth," the detective replied, slowly.

"From what I know of Malachi Everest, I should say he was not the man who did this deed, for these rascals all have their particular lines, and they rarely get out of them."

"The bank-robber is a bank-robber always; the confidence man seldom tries any other game; a burglar would about as soon starve as attempt to pick a pocket, and your true 'knock,' as the light-fingered gentleman who operate on your pockets are termed, never would dare to 'crack a crib' after the style of the genuine High Toby, as the first-class workman in the house-breaking line is called."

"And then another thing about this Malachi Everest. I never knew or heard of his being mixed up with any petticoat."

"Nearly all these scoundrels have wives or female friends, but he never had any weakness in that line, and so it doesn't seem to me as if he—a cool, cautious, long-headed rascal, used to every turn of fortune's wheel—could be induced for the sake of any woman to commit such a crime."

"But if he hadn't anything to do with it, how comes it that his name was brought into the matter at all?" Talbot asked.

The arguments of the detective appeared to be sound enough, but the question he put was a decided puzzle to him.

"The only explanation I can offer is that the real criminal knew that Everest was in the West and near to the scene of the crime, and being acquainted with his record thought it was a capital idea to cover up the real trail by assuming to be Everest."

"This explanation seems reasonable," Talbot remarked.

"Have patience, and within a week at the furthest I will have some reliable information for you, for I think I know where I can put my hands on Everest or some of his pals who will do about as well."

"Meanwhile you must remain here as my guests, and, if you will be guided by me, you will not venture abroad except in disguise."

"The man who is striking such deadly blows at you, has a decided advantage at present."

"He is in the dark and you are in the light. He sees you while you cannot see him."

"Change this! Keep shady until I can ascertain who and what he is, and then we may be able to turn the tables on him."

That this was good advice was evident to the pards, and they immediately promised to be guided by it.

Day was beginning to break before any of the party wooed the god of slumber, but to these men of iron endurance this mattered not.

After breakfast on the next morning the detective set out on his mission.

His first endeavor was to find out what had become of the man who had been wounded in the hotel fight and who had been rescued from the burning building by the firemen.

He had been carried to the hospital, and Phenix had little trouble in finding him.

The man scowled when he recognized the detective and saw he was approaching his cot.

This fellow was an imported ruffian known as Codger Bill.

A burly ruffian who professed to be a prize-fighter but who was in reality a thief of the low and vulgar order.

A fellow without the least bit of standing in the fraternity, and who was generally employed by the more accomplished crooks to do the dirty and dangerous work.

The detective sauntered up to the bedside and seated himself, nodding to the wounded man as he did so.

"How do you find yourself, Codger?" he asked.

"Well, I ain't so bad as I might be," the man replied, sulkily, unwilling to be questioned, yet too afraid of the detective to dare to refrain from answering.

"You've got a very nasty hurt, I understand?"

"Might be worse," the other muttered, glaring at the sleuth-hound from the corners of his half-shut eyes and mentally wondering what "leetle game" the bloodhound of the law had now in view.

Instinctively the fellow scented danger.

"Say, what induced you and your pals to put up this job on those two strangers in the hotel?" asked Phenix, abruptly, fixing his piercing eyes as he spoke searchingly on the face of the man.

The sullen face of the ruffian grew still more sullen as he growled:

"I don't know w'ot ye'r' talking about."

"Oh, yes you do!" the detective replied sternly, and with an air that plainly indicated he did not intend to be trifled with.

"You might as well make a clean breast of it first as last. I've got you dead to rights, and if you are wise you will not make me ugly, for if you do, it will be the worse for you. You ought to know me well enough by this time to

understand that it isn't a paying thing to try any games on me.

"I know how you received your wound, and if you are not inclined to be reasonable I'll make the strangers appear against you and have you sent up the river."

"W'ot do yer want ter know?"

"Who put up the job?"

"Red Murphy."

"And what had Malachi Everest to do with it?"

"Nothing as I knows on; I lied to the cove when he tried to pump me and give him the fu'st name that came handy."

"What was Murphy after?"

"The coves' money. He said they were minsters from the West, and had lashings of gold."

Phenix was rather inclined to believe that this was the truth, but he affected to think the fellow was lying, and promptly told him so; but the man protested it was the truth, and at last Phenix, somewhat in doubt, departed.

"I must bring my Western friends and Malachi Everest face to face," he soliloquized. "Then, if they recognize that he is Mr. Smithers, I will have something to go upon, but if they don't, I am all at sea."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE THIEVES' DEN.

It was no easy matter for any detective officer to secure an "interview" with such a man as Malachi Everest, for as Joe Phenix explained to Talbot:

"This master scoundrel has his spies and his detective police just the same as a European king, and it is fully as difficult to get at him."

"His head-quarters are in a so-called English ale and chop-house up-town, on one of the cross-streets off of Broadway, but that is only a blind, for the place is a house of call for thieves and depends entirely upon their patronage."

"From the landlord behind the bar down to the pot-boy who carries around the beer, there isn't a soul connected with the place who isn't crooked in some way."

"I thought we had some pretty tough dens out West in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains, but from your description, I am inclined to think that here in New York you can discount anything in that line," Talbot remarked.

"Oh, yes, there isn't the least doubt about that. The dens on the outskirts of civilization may be a little rougher, but when it comes to downright deviltry, a big, overgrown city is the place to find it; but you will see from the description of this dive, that it isn't an easy matter for any police spy to get into it without exciting suspicion."

"If we had any good grounds to go upon, so that we could get a warrant for Everest's arrest, we might make a raid and pull the whole place, then we might be able to capture the head demon, if the affair was properly managed."

"But, as it is, my idea is to bring you and this man together, so that you will have a chance to see if you can identify him."

"If he was the old man who had inquired the way to Murphy's Gulch, also this fresh young Mr. Smithers from the country, we will be able to make a case against him."

"The difficult thing is to find a spy cunning enough to penetrate into the den and ascertain if the master spider is at home."

"Boss, I'm jest the man w'ot kin do that job," Bowers exclaimed. "I have roughed it considerable in my time, and my eddication has been so complete that I kin drink with any tinker in the country in his own language."

"Let the ole original Joe Bowers sail in and show 'em a trick or two."

"If this Everest cuss is the same feller w'ot was out West, he don't know me from a side of sole leather, for we never happened to run across one another."

"Oh, I tell you, I kin do the job up brown! and it will be kinder of a relief to me to get into some old clothes ag'in, and for to get b'iling full so I kin lay down in the mud and howl for joy!"

"It is a dangerous mission," Phenix observed, who did not exactly know what to make of the veteran. "By going into this den in disguise to worm out the secrets of the outlaws who congregated there, you really take your life in your hand."

"W'ot do you s'pose I keer for that?" exclaimed the veteran, snapping his fingers in supreme contempt.

"W'ot is my life worth, anyway? I don't believe thar's an insurance company in the world w'ot would be willing to go ten dollars onto it."

"You need not be afraid of Joe's ability to perform the task," Talbot observed. "I've known him for some years now, and I never knew him to get into a scrape so bad that he couldn't wriggle out of it."

"Cert, and that's the kind of a mule-driver I am!" Bowers asserted, with considerable dignity.

"Oh, thar ain't any discount on me; I'm the

clean, white article, and no mistake—I'm all wool, and a yard wide!"

And so it was settled that Bowers should undertake the difficult task of entering the thieves' den for the purpose of ascertaining if the supreme rascal, Malachi Everest, could be got at.

Bowers had truly said that it would be a relief to him to get his old clothes on again, and it was so.

Respectability did not sit well upon the shoulders of the natural-born bummer.

As he expressed it:

"I hain't been on a fu'st-class tear since I left the mountains, and my soul yearns to try the bug-juice of this hyer degenerate East, and see if it kin git away with me as quick as the unadulterated liquid lightning that we children of the sun p'ison ourselves with in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains."

As a full fledged tramp, then, seedy clothes, shoes down at the heel, stale beer and bad tobacco smell, all complete to the light, the veteran one night about nine o'clock made his *entree* into the house of call of the thieves, which was tolerably well filled with ruffians of various grades, from the petty sneak-thief to the first-class bank robber who would scorn to trouble himself with any job that was not likely to pan out big money, two or three thousand at the least.

It was a very quiet and decorous assemblage; the room was fitted up after the English fashion; a small bar, almost hidden away in a nook, behind which the owner of the place, a burly, beef fed Englishman, presided, and scattered around the apartment were a dozen small tables, around which the customers of the house sat.

Everything was plain, and the stranger happening to drop into the place would hardly have been apt to surmise that he was in the presence of some of the most notorious rascals that could be scared up in the country.

All the men were tolerably well dressed; some of them, the High Toby men of the profession, were quite elaborately got up, expensive clothes, and costly jewelry.

But if the stranger who chanced to drop into the place was a man gifted with a good pair of eyes and blessed with the faculty of putting two and two together, he would surely have noticed that there was something odd about the frequenters of this ale-house.

The customers sat in groups about the little tables, almost all of them indulging in liquid stimulants, or else blowing a cloud from either pipes or cigars, with pipes decidedly in the majority, and some few were playing cards or dominoes, but all seemed to be more or less under restraint.

As they conversed, all conversation being carried on in subdued whispers, each group had their eyes upon their neighbors, as though they feared that what they said might be overheard, and were determined that it should not be if they could prevent it.

The advent of Bowers created a decided sensation, and all present surveyed him with anxious eyes.

The bummer came rolling into the place, tolerably well primed with liquor, but not half so drunk as he pretended to be.

The burly host surveyed him with a slight look of disgust; he was not anxious for customers of his kidney, for he took the new-comer to be a tramp on a begging expedition.

"You've come to the wrong shop, my man!" he exclaimed, before Bowers could open his mouth.

"We sell liquor here I want you to understand and we don't give it away; so you had better move your trotters out of here as soon as you're able."

"Oh, come now, bully rook!" cried Bowers, supporting himself on the edge of the counter and grinning at the landlord until his mouth seemed to extend from ear to ear; "whoaxed you for a drink? I'm a gentleman, I am, and don't you forget it."

"I believe you, my boy!" exclaimed the Englishman, in derision. "You're a reg'lar howlin' swell, you are, and no mistake."

"Say! do you carry your photograph 'round with you to give to your friends, so that they kin look at your lovely mug when you ain't to the fore?"

"You kin jest bet all your wealth on that, me noble dook!" Bowers answered, readily. "My photos are pretty well distributed all over this broad and bloomin' country. I reckon there ain't a rogue's gallery in the land w'ot hasn't got one, ho, ho, ho!"

The assembled crooks exchanged glances at this rather personal allusion; the remark struck home, for there was hardly a man in the room whose portrait did not grace some police headquarters.

"Oh, yes, I'm well known, you can gamble on that, too," Bowers continued. "There's hardly a police captain in any big city in the country who ain't as well acquainted with me as though I was his own brother, and some of them are so mighty affectionate that when they once get hold on me they hate to let me go."

"They kinder hunger for my society, you see."

"But that ain't neither here nor thar. I've come in to wet my whistle, and that's my business jest now; and as I am flush with money as a goldfinch"—and as proof of the assertion he slapped a handful of coin, both silver and gold, down upon the counter with a ring that caused every one in the room to prick up their ears like so many hungry wolves—"I should be glad to stand a 'shout' for the company."

"Do you understand what that means, mates? I'll go bail you don't, unless some of you coves have 'done time' in Australia."

"I'm a-standing treat, and you kin all call for yer liquor as soon as you like and hang the expense."

The crowd were nothing loth to accept the proffered drink, and the sight of the money at once mollified the host.

"Don't talk so loud, man," he cautioned. "We are all friends here, in course, but it's jest as well to keep a still tongue in your head when you are in a public place, for there's no telling who may be 'round,' and the host cast an inquisitive look over the throng, who were now busily engaged in disposing of the drink which they had so unexpectedly procured at the stranger's expense."

The landlord was tolerably well acquainted with every man in the room, but there was always danger of a traitor in the camp, and so he judged it best to caution the literal stranger.

"Say," said Bowers, in a cautious undertone, "I'm ole business, I am; I'm jest from Philamalink, and if the old man is ripe for business, I reckon I kin put him up to a good thing."

"The old man?" and the ale-house-keeper looked askance at Bowers.

"Yes, I'm all right," and the bummer made a secret sign which Phenix had taught him.

The face of the host brightened.

"You're lucky," he said; "the old man is upstairs."

CHAPTER XVII.

BOWERS'S LITTLE GAME.

"OHO, you don't say so!" the veteran exclaimed in delight. "Well, now, you can jest bet yer bottom dollar that I am as tickled for to hear that as though I had come in for a fortune."

"Say, old man, we'll have to take a leetle h'ist of something on the strength of that—give it a name now, do, and make me feel proud."

"I never drink behind the bar," responded the jolly host, with a grin.

"Oh, don't you? of course not, without you're axed" and Bowers winked significantly.

"Well, me noble dook, you have got for to wet your whistle this time, and at my expense, too, and as I'm kinder thirsty myself—I am allers at this time o' night—I reckon I'll jest j'ine you."

"W'ot 'ticular p'ison do you most hanker arter—a leetle good brandy, eh?"

The face of the Englishman assumed a ruddier hue.

"I have got a prime article here and no mistake," he admitted. "And if you are anxious to wet your whistle, I s'pose it will answer as well as any tippie you kin scare up in town."

"But you don't want to ring the gang in on this racket."

"The blarsted stuff is worth twenty dollars a gallon, you know, and it would be a sheer waste to throw it away on these beggarly duffers with no souls above their beer."

"Right you are, me covey! Though I am rolling in wealth I don't see as thar is any call for me to chuck my ducats away," Bowers observed.

"And it might be some time afore you are so flush again too," the landlord suggested.

"Don't you worry your royal nibs 'bout that," Bowers replied, with a mysterious wink.

"I've got onto the biggest thing that has been struck by any cracksmen in this hyer country for a year, and that's why I want to see the old man."

"The job is too big for me to handle, you know, and thar ain't the least blooming bit of use for me to tackle it."

"I should only make a slump-up, and then all the fat would be in the fire."

"And that would be a shame," the landlord observed.

"Oh, yes, thar ain't any mistake 'bout that," Bowers replied.

"But if I put the boss on the scent he'll be able to do the job up prime."

"You can depend upon that!" the host hastened to assert. "Is there much money in the racket?"

"Bout ten thousand dollars," whispered the veteran in the ear of the other.

A low whistle of astonishment came from the lips of the landlord.

"That is a big thing," he remarked.

"And as easy to git almost as turning your hand over—it's a bank with an old-fashioned safe—a country bank, that I got on when I was off for a little trip for the good of my health—and my pocket."

"As easy a crib to crack as I ever see'd in all my born days, and I reckon I've seen some

pretty neat work in my time, though maybe you wouldn't think so to look at me, 'cos I'm all run down at the heel now.

"It's all the fault of the lush," the veteran explained. "If I could only let run alone and keep out of boozing kens, I could hold my own with any crackman w'ot ever crossed the water."

"You're English, eh?"

"Blarst yer blooming eyes! did yer take me for a duffer of a Yankee?" Bowers demanded, pretending to be amazed that there could be a doubt in regard to his citizenship.

"Oh, no; I thought you were a transplant."

"I'm a Brum from Birmingham, and when I was a trifle younger I could hold my own with my dukes with any man of my weight in the district, but that's neither here nor thar. I've been in this bleeding country ever since I was turned of eighteen—had to cut and run when I was only a kid, 'cos I knocked out my man in a mill and the bloke never had the decency for to come to."

"The bobbies and the beaks called it murder, and I had to git out between two days."

"Mebbe you hearn tell of Ben Count's novice, 'Pop, the Pot-boy?'"

The publican nodded. The name seemed familiar to him, and he fancied he had heard of some such individual—the once-famous pugilist, Ben Count, being well known to him.

"Well, that's me, and when I came to this country I jest changed my name, called myself Jock Count, and went out West to the mines, and I've had more ups and downs than could be told of in a week."

"I give up milling when I got big and my wind began to give out, and as I've allers done a little on the 'cross, I went into it as a reg'lar biz; but the West has been gitting too hot to hold me lately, and so I've come East."

"You've made a good move, if you can put the boss up to as good a thing as you say," the landlord remarked.

"I kin do it every time!" the veteran declared, impressively. "I'm jest old reliable, I am."

"Go through the door there," and the Englishman indicated a small door in the back of the room near the bar, "and I'll meet you."

Bowers did as he was bidden, and found himself in a small private room right back of the bar.

The landlord soon made his appearance, bearing two glasses of brandy.

"Here's luck to us, mate!" he said, as he handed one to the veteran.

"So say we all of us!" responded Bowers, and then the b'rnly was disposed of in a twinkling.

"How much, pard?" asked the veteran, jingling his money.

"Oh, that's all right! I stand treat this time. Come along."

Then through a rear door the host conducted Bowers into the small yard at the back of the house.

The lot, being a corner one, through a gate in the brick wall which hemmed in the yard on one side, access could be gained to the street.

A covered wooden stairway led from the yard to the second floor of the house.

On the lower step of the stairway sat a rather under-sized, bullet-headed, evil-looking fellow.

"This cove wants to see the old man on particular business," said the host, addressing the youth.

"All right, I guess he kin," responded the sentinel, for such he evidently was, making a careful inspection of the bunmer as he spoke.

"When you get through with the captain drop into the bar again and we'll have another rouse," the jolly landlord remarked, Bowers having evidently made an extremely favorable impression upon him.

"All right, me noble dook, I am yours to command!" the veteran replied, with a profound bow.

The landlord disappeared within the house, and the sentinel rose to his feet.

"You're a nice-looking duffer," he said, in contempt.

"The same to you, you hump-back, bandy-legged son of a sea cook!" responded Bowers, with cheerful pleasantry.

The young man by this time had ascended three steps of the staircase.

"Wot's that you say?" he exclaimed. "You don't want to give me any of your jaw or I'll belt you in the mug!"

"Ease up on your lip or I'll mash you flatter'n a b'iled muskeeter!" responded Bowers, who had determined upon getting the sentinel out of the way, for as long as he kept watch upon the staircase it was clearly impossible for a surprise to be worked.

"You jest wait till you come out, you old snoozer, and if I don't make it warm for you—"

What more the young shoulder-bitter would have said will never be known, for, as he turned to ascend the stairs, Bowers caught him around the neck and choked him into insensibility with a wonderful quickness, then he tied him and placed a gag in his mouth.

This accomplished, he quickly summoned Talbot and Phenix, who waited upon the opposite sidewalk.

"You go in first and see if the coast is clear," said the detective.

Bowers obeyed immediately.

He turned the handle of the door, it was unlocked, and opening, gave him entrance to the sanctum of the outlaw chief.

Everest was alone in the room, undisguised and busy with some letters as Bowers entered.

"I beg your pardon, boss," said the veteran.

"The cuss down stairs told me to come up. I've come to let you into a job," and then he gave a whistle and Phenix and Talbot made their appearance.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

THE surprise was complete, and yet Everest never quailed in the least nor manifested any particular concern.

He merely looked amazed as any man might have done at the unceremonious intrusion of the strangers through the rear door, but did not betray any alarm.

"Are these gentlemen acquaintances of yours?" he asked, turning to Bowers.

"Yes, they are my pards now, I reckon."

Both Talbot and Phenix surveyed Everest with decided interest.

The first was anxious to see if he could trace any resemblance between the man whom he now faced and the old fellow who had inquired the way to Murphy's Gulch amid the wilds of Colorado, and he looked too to ascertain if Everest was the man who, masquerading under the name of Smithers, had so completely hoodwinked him.

But keen of vision as was Injun Dick in this instance, he found his judgment was at fault.

If the pale, cool and gentleman-sport like Malachi Everest had played the roles of the old man and the fresh young countryman, his disguise in both parts had been so complete, that it was impossible to trace any resemblance now that he appeared in his own proper person, and yet the Indian animal-like instinct which was so strong in Injun Dick Talbot, seemed to warn him that he really stood in presence of the true criminal—the murderer whom he had tracked from the Rocky Mountains to the great city of the East.

It was the first time too that the great sleuth-hound, Joe Phenix, had ever stood face to face with the master rascal whose well-planned schemes he had often succeeded in baffling when minor rascals had attempted to carry them out.

It was only natural under the circumstances that the detective should survey with considerable curiosity the man who was supposed to have originated fully one-half of all the great criminal enterprises which had bothered the police during the last ten years.

Assuredly Malachi Everest did not look to be a desperate and determined criminal, although the lines in his face would have satisfied a close observer, who was a good judge of his fellow-man, that the fellow, despite his quiet look, was possessed of an indomitable will and a courage that would not falter at any possible danger.

"I suppose you intend this as a sort of a little surprise party for me," Everest continued. "Although I am really in the dark as to what has procured for me the honor of making the acquaintance of any one of you gentlemen."

"Oh, come, Everest, that is entirely too gauzy," Joe Phenix exclaimed. "Though we have never met before, you know me well enough."

"Upon my word I assure you that you have the advantage of me," the other replied, with a pleasant smile, as though he looked upon the matter as a good joke.

"You evidently know me, for you call me by name, but I cannot return the compliment."

"My name is Phenix."

"The appellation of a fabulous bird, but often a human cognomen, I judge."

"Joseph Phenix—I am a detective officer."

"Yes, yes, yes, I believe I have heard of you, now that you recall your name to my memory."

"You are one of those wonderful detective fellows who are always coming in unexpectedly through doors and windows, but just at the nick of time always, clapping trembling and baffled villains on the shoulder or else putting pistols to their heads, coupled with the exclamation, in a deep base voice: 'You are my prisoner!' You see I am well posted. I never happened to run across the thing in real life, but I have seen it done on the stage and read about it in novels a hundred times."

"You are disposed to be merry over the matter," Phenix remarked, with a smile, really enjoying the coolness of the man.

It was a pleasure for the experienced detective to meet with a first-class rascal.

There was some fun in hunting down really big game, for the most of the prey nowadays were only petty scoundrels, hardly worth the trouble of capturing.

"Oh, no, merely expressing the sentiments I feel about the matter. Of course, gentlemen, I hope you will do me the justice not to take me for a fool, and I fully understand that this surprise game of yours means business. I must admit the thing was cleverly worked, for I had not the least idea that such a trap was going to be sprung."

"This entertaining fellow,"—and he nodded to Bowers, who grinned and made an elaborate bow, as though pleased at the compliment,—"managed to gain access to me by pretending that he had some money-making scheme in which he desired my co-operation."

"He talked in a style which led me to believe he thought I wasn't any better than I ought to be."

"I own, frankly, gentlemen, that I am a sporting man—I am all that the name implies, and although some of my detractors choose to hint sometimes that I use unfair means to attain the end I desire to reach, yet I am not any worse than the rest of the men of my kidney who make a living on the green turf of the race-track by day, and are ardent devotees of King Faro at night."

"Oh, you know well enough what we come about, Everest!" exclaimed Phenix, bluntly. "and there ain't any use of beating about the bush."

"Not the slightest," observed Talbot. "You know me and I know you."

"The latter may be true, but the first I deny," Everest replied, perfectly cool.

"Considering that you have attempted to kill me on three separate occasions this pretended ignorance is rather far-fetched, it seems to me," Talbot observed.

"Upon my word, I assure you that you are talking in riddles. I protest I do not understand it at all."

"You are wanted, Everest!" said Phenix, in his stern way. "Do you understand that?"

"Certainly; such a summons cannot be misunderstood," and the man fairly laughed in the face of the detective, as though he thought the matter was a good joke.

"May I ask of what crime I am accused?"

"Murder!"

A low whistle escaped from Everest's lips.

"Murder, eh?" he exclaimed. "Well, it's no light matter, and I begin to believe I must get a little serious about it. Who am I accused of murdering?"

"Leander Beaverwick."

"Never heard of such a man," he commented.

"And where and when did I do this deed?"

"About a month ago, on the outskirts of Yampa City, Colorado."

"I really must plead ignorance of all knowledge of any such a remarkably named town. In fact, I never was in Colorado but once in my life, and as you, Mr. Phenix, remarked a little while ago, the thing is too gauzy altogether."

"The accusation is ridiculous and I can prove that I was in New York a month ago by a dozen witnesses."

"Yes, but you will not be tried in New York. It is my intention to procure a requisition and have you taken back to Colorado to be tried," Talbot remarked.

"In the language of the sporting world, illustrious stranger, let me tell you that that chicken will not fight," Everest replied, contemptuously.

"Phenix, you ought to know better than that. Tell this gentlemen that we have some able criminal lawyers in New York and that it isn't an easy matter to take men out of the city who are backed by money and friends without there is exceedingly strong proof of their having committed the crime with which they are charged."

"I know what your game is as well as though I put up the cards myself," he continued, addressing Talbot.

"You men out in Colorado want a victim. If you should succeed in getting me out there, Judge Lynch would come some fine night and that would be the end of your humble servant, hanged without the formality of a trial."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CHALLENGE.

"Ono, ho!" and Everest gave utterance to a loud laugh. "It is a good scheme, a very good scheme indeed, but the trouble with the thing is that it will not work; otherwise it is all right."

"Oh, you're the boss, you air!" exclaimed Bowers, who had been gazing at the cool-headed adventurer with evident amazement and who found it impossible to refrain from confessing his admiration at the pluck displayed by the accused.

"Well, I'm boss enough not to be the victim of such a shallow trick as this extradition to the wilds of Colorado," the other replied.

"Come, Phenix, speak out!" he added. "I've always heard you spoken of as a square man. Have the kindness to explain to this gentleman—I've not had the pleasure of learning your name—"

"Talbot—Richard Talbot—you know it well enough," Injun Dick replied.

"I will not dispute with you on the subject, for it isn't really worth wasting words about," Everest observed with a gesture of impatience.

"I have already denied that I knew you or anything about you and I shall not trouble myself to repeat the denial; but as I was about to remark, will you, Phenix, have the kindness to explain to this gentleman that matters cannot be carried with so high a hand in the city of New York as in some mining-camps in the Colorado wilderness?"

"And, Phenix, dear boy, it isn't the least bit of use for you to try any bluff game on so old a stager as myself.

"This accusation is absurd and I feel perfectly sure that you haven't proof enough to warrant you in getting out an order for my arrest."

"Well, you will feel more certain about that in the next hour or two," the detective replied, trying to work the old game of frightening the man into making some damaging admission, the trump card of the bloodhounds of the law from time immemorial.

But Malachi Everest was no greenhorn to be caught by such a shallow trick, nor was he a weak-spirited coward to lose heart at the first signs of danger.

Everest burst into a laugh, and he really seemed as if he enjoyed the matter.

"Very well played, Phenix!" he exclaimed, "but the cards you hold are not strong enough to win in this game.

"Console yourself with the thought that the best men will fail sometimes, and that it is no wonder that from the nettle danger you cannot pluck the flower safety when your case is as weak as this one."

"Don't you be too sure of that," the detective advised.

"Oh, but I know how matters stand," the other replied, "and I am willing to talk fair and aboveboard with you.

"I am certain that you can't have any proofs I did the deed, for I wasn't within a thousand miles of the locality where the murder occurred at the time of the untimely taking-off of the man.

"In fact I don't believe that I was ever anywhere near the spot, for I haven't the remotest idea of where it is.

"All that I know of Colorado is the city of Denver, and I know mighty little about that; I merely spent a week there some ten years ago.

"Now then, come, let us deal openly in this matter. You are both reasonable men, I judge, and I am willing to let you weigh the evidence in the case.

"I know it must be of the most flimsy material, and, as the old saying has it, will not hold water at all.

"What proof have you against me? I dare you to state it! If I cannot explain it away to your satisfaction, I am ready to go with you, warrant or no warrant."

Talbot and the detective looked at each other. This was certainly a novel offer.

"What do you say, Mr. Talbot?" Phenix asked.

"Go ahead just as you please; you know far more of such matters than I do and are better calculated to judge," was the reply.

"It is the easiest way to settle it," Everest urged. "If you haven't got a case, what is the use of dragging me into notoriety?"

"I think Mr. Phenix will be free to tell you that during the past ten years I have been in a measure persecuted by meddlesome detectives, trying like a lot of blind men to hit upon a clew by accident which they were not wise enough to search for and find—and pig-headed police captains who took it into their heads that because I was successful in a few pieces of sharp practice on the turf, I was at the bottom of two-thirds of all the big crimes committed in the country.

"The officious gentlemen have done their best to make it hot for me—have laid all sorts of traps to catch me on the hip, and as Phenix would vouch, each and every attempt was an utter failure.

"To dip into poetry, not a spot in my armor could be penetrated by the lance of Justice, although the blind goddess struck at me with all her power.

"But this persecution gave me a bad name. I was known as a sport and a gambler, and there were plenty of people in the world ready to believe the lies that were so freely retailed about me, and the first thing I knew I found myself passing as the patron and guide of the most notorious malefactors known to the law.

"Give a dog a bad name and hang him; it's an old proverb and a very true one, but pardon this digression; go ahead with your evidence, that is, if you are willing to accept my proposition."

As Phenix could not see that any material harm could be done by so doing, he signified he was agreeable.

"In the first place your presence in the neighborhood of the tragedy is proved by the evidence of Mr. Talbot here, to whom you

came on the night of the murder and only a short time before the tragedy was committed and inquired the road to Murphy's Gulch."

"A poetic name with a pratie flavor," observed Everest.

"On that occasion you were disguised as an old man."

"And Mr. Talbot, I presume, fancies that he recognized in me the party who accosted him disguised as an old man?"

"Exactly."

"Now we'll trouble you to take the stand, Mr. Talbot, if you please," Everest said, turning to Dick with a pleasant smile, as though all this proceeding was but an excellent jest.

"Are you willing now to take your place upon the witness-stand, under a solemn oath, mind you, and swear that you recognize in me the old man who inquired the way to Murphy's—Murphy's what is it?" he asked, turning to Phenix.

"Murphy's Gulch."

"Yes, Murphy's Gulch. Not being either a miner or a Western man, I am not as familiar as I might be with the odd appellations that they affix to their settlements in the Far West.

"Now, will you swear on your oath, knowing that it may bring my neck within the hangman's noose, that I am the man who came to you in disguise on the night that this murder occurred?"

"No, I could not swear positively to the fact, although there is something about you that seems to remind me of the party," Talbot replied, slowly.

"That settles your first piece of evidence, Phenix," Everest observed, in a tone of quiet contempt. "Now bring on the rest!"

"Four men attacked Mr. Talbot and his friend at a river crossing. Three were killed in the fight, and the fourth one, badly wounded, named you as the instigator of the attack."

Everest laughed outright.

"Oh, that's too thin; what would the evidence of such a scoundrel be worth? You know, Phenix, it wouldn't be worth a rush.

"Go on; probably the strongest card you have held in reserve."

"In the disguise of a green young countryman you made the acquaintance of these two gentlemen on the cars, discovered where they intended to stop, and attempted to murder them at night. One of your pals was wounded in the fight; he is now in the hospital, and is willing to bear witness that you were the leader of the job."

"Oh, no, he is not willing to do anything of the kind," the other said, decidedly. "I have heard from him; he sent for me the moment you got away, and told me how hard you had tried to get him to swear against me."

"I only wanted him to swear to the truth!" Phenix exclaimed.

"Well, he will not swear to that fiction, and you know it, and now, Mr. Talbot, are you prepared to swear that I personated this green countryman who humbugged you so successfully?"

"No, I cannot—your disguise was too perfect—although I think you are the man."

"Now, Phenix, do you think you can make anything out of this matter?" Everest asked, triumphantly. "Haden't you better stop before you get into it, and so save yourself from crushing defeat?"

"You are a cowardly murderer!" cried Talbot, abruptly, "and although the law may not be able to reach you, yet private vengeance can. You dare not meet me man to man!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE DUEL.

"Oho, ho!" cried the other, his eyes flashing and his face growing a trifle white, a sure sign that he was getting angry.

When passion's fury made other men turn red, sending the blood in torrents to their cheeks, Malachi Everest grew deadly pale and those who were best acquainted with him affirmed that he was never so dangerous—so ready to strike a mortal blow, as when he seemed from the whiteness of his face to be on the verge of fainting.

"This language of yours sounds something like a challenge."

"That is about the English of it," Talbot replied, dryly.

"My dear sir, this sort of thing may do out in the wild West—it may be just the cheese for the mountains of Colorado, but it is entirely played out in the East," Everest replied languidly, but his eyes were still blazing and his face still deathly pale.

"They do a little of it down in Virginia, sometimes though, I believe," Injun Dick remarked.

"Oh, yes, among the 'chivalry' the 'code' still is in force, but really I don't see why I am called upon to risk my life upon the field of honor simply because you have taken some foolish notions into your head and do not choose to listen to reason."

"You call yourself a sporting man, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And from what you have said I judge that you are rather proud of the title, the assumed character being so much better than your real one."

"I don't know about that," Everest retorted with a lowering look.

"Sporting men generally regard themselves as gentlemen and will submit to a considerable sacrifice rather than forfeit their title to the name, and when a difficulty occurs between two of them they generally settle it in their own fashion without calling upon the law to interfere."

"Now, then, I am going to avenge the death of my murdered pard, brutally struck down by you in cold blood."

"You are a cowardly scoundrel and you don't deserve to have a chance for your life, but I feel so sure I will kill you that I am willing to risk the encounter, otherwise I would feel justified in killing you as a wild beast ought to be killed."

For a moment the breath of Everest came hard and thick and so enraged was he that he could not bring himself to speak.

At last, however, he succeeded in taming the demon of passion raging in his breast, and in a tone whose coolness gave no indication of the storm raging within his veins, said:

"Don't you think you had better cut my throat at once and have done with it, since you feel so deuced certain of the result?" he asked, sarcastically.

"Oh, no, I'll give you a chance for your life, although I doubt if you were as merciful to your victim, for, from the appearance of his body, it is evident you killed him in cold blood."

"You are downright crazy about this matter, I see, and I begin to understand that it is useless to waste words upon you. But, I say, Phenix, how does this idea of a duel strike you? As an officer of the law, I suppose you ought not to know anything about it."

"Oh, it doesn't make any difference; I never interfere with gentlemen's amusements, and you forget that I am not strictly an officer of the law, but engaged in my own private detective business."

"Yes, yes, true; then you have no call to interfere, and can not only let the sport proceed, but enjoy it as well as the next man?"

The detective nodded.

Phenix was an odd fish. He doubted if there would ever be sufficient proof obtained to fasten the crime of the murder upon Everest, although in his own mind there was very little doubt he was the guilty party, and from the evidence which he had already received of the prowess of the stranger from the far West, he felt certain he would be able not only to hold his own in a contest with the old man, as Malachi Everest was commonly termed by the cracksmen who looked upon him in the light of a leader, but he would be able to come out first-best in the struggle.

"As the challenged party, I have the right to the choice of weapons, I believe," said Everest.

"That is correct," Talbot replied.

"I presume that, like the majority of the mountain and prairie men, you are expert with both pistol and rifle?"

"Yes, I am a good shot with both."

"You can probably handle a Lowie-knife in a way not to be despised?"

"Yes, I am an expert with the bowie-knife."

"Then those three weapons are exactly the ones I shall not choose. You have bantered me into this fight, and I do not intend you shall kill me in cold blood, if I know myself," the other replied, with a malevolent smile.

"With the small sword—the gentleman's weapon—you are not probably so familiar?"

"No, I confess my education has been rather neglected as far as swords are concerned."

"And I, on the contrary, am as good a swordsman as ever took a weapon in hand!" Everest cried.

"Therefore, I choose swords, and I give you my word before we commence that I will spit you with as little ceremony as though you were a partridge who was to be trussed for roasting."

"Threatened men live long," Talbot replied, contemptuously.

"When shall we settle this affair? If you ask my advice on the subject, I should say as soon as possible," Everest remarked.

"I have a couple of pair of swords, all alike as far as the eye can see, and you can take your choice of them."

"There's a bright moon shining—a delightful night for such a meeting."

"Suppose we take a boat and pull down the harbor. The artificial stone—the foundation for the statue of Liberty Enlightening the World—is in position, and a prettier place for a bit of sword-play it would be hard to find."

"I'm agreeable," Talbot replied.

"I need a second: I suppose Phenix will be yours?" rattled on Everest, in a cool, matter-of-fact way.

"A doctor, too, is required. There is a medical gentleman next door upon whose discreet-

ness we may rely, so we will not be detained by being obliged to hunt up a man.

"The gentleman who will act as my second is below, and with your permission, gentlemen, I will summon him."

Then Everest went to a speaking-tube in the wall and spoke through it.

In a few seconds a tall, saturnine-looking individual made his appearance.

Phenix and the new-comer exchanged glances. The detective and the gloomy-looking gentleman were old acquaintances.

He was commonly known as Melancholy Mike, and was reputed to be one of the most expert confidence men in the country.

Phenix had once had the pleasure of sending the gentleman to Sing Sing stone hotel for a three years' term, and Mike had had a high respect for the detective king ever since.

He bore no malice, for it was all done in the way of business, and a man ought not to be blamed for following his trade.

Everest briefly explained the situation.

"This gentleman," he said, indicating Talbot, "is anxious to either give or take a few lessons in swordsmanship; I am going to accommodate him, and I should like you to attend the picnic in the guise of my best man."

Mike looked rather surprised, but he was too much of a man of the world to express any amazement.

A better second in an affair of this kind it would have been hard to find, for in his youth Mike had been employed in a fencing-school in the old country before he took to bad courses, and had carte and tierce at his finger's end.

He expressed himself as being delighted to be of service.

The doctor was summoned, the swords carefully wrapped in a bundle so that no inquisitive eye could detect what they were, and then the party set out.

They proceeded straight to the water's edge. Mike negotiated for the use of a boat, and soon the party was afloat.

The tide was on the ebb, and swiftly they floated down the stream.

By the time they had passed Castle Garden and got out into the harbor it was after eleven, and with the exception of the shipping anchored in the stream they had the water all to themselves.

"We are all right if we don't attract the attention of the police-boat," Everest observed. "They might be inclined to be inquisitive, but I do not think we would have any difficulty in satisfying them."

From the perfect acquaintance which the old man showed with everything connected with the trip, particularly his knowledge of the tides, and how the currents ran, Phenix came to the conclusion that it was not the first time Everest had captained a water-party, and immediately in his mind came remembrances of some successful hauls the river-thieves had made, and now he was satisfied he was in the company of the man who planned the raid.

The island was reached, and the party clambered to the broad surface of the stone, and then, after the preliminaries were arranged, sword in hand the antagonists faced each other, stripped to their shirts and pantaloons, and with their right arms bare.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DUEL.

THE moon shone upon the scene in majestic beauty.

Afar off glimmered the lights of the great twin cities, New York and Brooklyn, connected by a chain of fire from the electric lights upon the bridge.

There was a decided contrast between the two, for Talbot "stripped large," to use the sporting phrase.

That is, when his outward garments were removed, it was apparent he was a much bigger man than he seemed.

And Everest, who was watching his opponent with the eyes of a hawk as he prepared for the encounter, was astonished at the muscular development of the Westerner.

"I say, Mike," he observed to his second, who was assisting him to disrobe, "did you ever see such an infernal muscular wretch?"

"Well, I must say I never did, for a man of his size. He strips like a prize-fighter."

"Indeed he does; he's a model of a man. See how the muscles stand out through the skin, just like whip-cords; all good solid stuff too. I don't believe the fellow has an ounce of fat or superfluous flesh on him."

"Why, if he had been training for months to meet a man like the Boston slugger in a four-round contest, he couldn't have appeared in better condition."

"Small chance you would have against him if fists were to be the weapons instead of swords," Mike remarked, with an admiring glance at the muscular arms of the representative of the Centennial State.

There was no disputing the truth of this observation, for there was a vast difference in the

appearance of the two men, now that they were stripped for the fight.

For a man of his size and build, Everest was uncommonly muscular, wiry and steel-like, but there was no comparison between him and his antagonist.

Talbot was so much larger that he appeared to be fully fifty pounds the better man.

"I guess you are about right, Mike," Everest answered.

"In a boxing-match I think it is very likely he would get away with me in a manner that I should despise, but when it comes to the steel blades, then it is not so much a question of muscular strength."

"As you well know, I have been able to hold my own with some of the best fencing-masters in the country, and it is not likely that this Westerner will be able to cope with me."

"In fact, I think it is about a thousand dollars to a cent that I will spit him with my blade within the first five minutes."

"Oh, there isn't much doubt about that," Mike remarked. "It isn't likely he can be up to any trick with the sword that you don't know."

And while this conversation was going on between the two, one somewhat similar in its nature was being indulged in by the opposite faction.

"This galoot thinks he's got a soft thing in this hyer b'iling," Bowers remarked, as he assisted Talbot to remove his coat.

"Yes, I shouldn't be surprised if he is a good swordsman," Phenix observed.

"In fact, it seems to me that I have heard some yarns in regard to his skill with the sword."

"I can't recall the exact particulars now, but it seems to me that a couple of years ago he had an encounter at some fencing-school in New York with some foreigner who came here with the highest testimonials as to his skill as a swordsman, and Everest succeeded in getting by far the best of the match."

"I am a tolerable good man with the steel blades myself, and used to take a good deal of interest in the sport, and that is why, I suppose, I remember what this fellow's reputation is in that line."

"Well, I can't say that I am expert now," Talbot admitted.

"There was a time, long years ago—I was a youngster then here in New York—when I was a pretty fair swordsman, but as I have hardly had a foil in my hand since that time, I am decidedly rusty."

"Ain't you running a big risk then in this encounter?" Phenix asked.

He did not exactly understand why Talbot was taking the matter so coolly, if he was aware that the chances were all in favor of his getting killed in the encounter.

Bowers snickered outright as he noticed the misapprehension under which the able detective, in spite of all his shrewdness, was laboring.

"Don't you worry yourself about that, Mr. Phenix!" he exclaimed.

"I reckon my ole pard hyer ain't any more anxious to shuffle off this mortal coil than the average galoot."

Bowers did not comprehend how Talbot proposed to equalize the chances which now seemed so much in favor of his antagonist, but from his long acquaintance with Talbot he felt satisfied that Injun Dick had some scheme in his head by means of which he trusted to secure a victory.

"Ain't I right, pard?" he continued. "You don't calculate to let this ornery cuss rip you up like a dried codfish, do you?"

"Not if I can help it, and I think I can," Talbot replied. "As a general rule I don't mean to be skinned in any game that I choose to chip into, and although this fellow thinks, no doubt, that he has a soft thing of it, I reckon I will be able to make him change his mind before we get through with this picnic."

"Although I am not as expert with the sword as I might be, yet I know a trick or two in another line which I think I can work in here to advantage."

"I had a pard once up at the mines in Salmon river region who was an expert at the old English game of single-stick, and during the long winter-time, when the weather kept us within doors I studied the play, and became about as skillful at it as he was."

"My gentleman over yonder is undoubtedly an excellent fencer, but the chances are a hundred to one that he never heard of single-stick, and when I give him a taste of a trick or two in that line, I have an idea he will discover that he has not got so soft a thing on hand as he imagines."

By this time the antagonists were prepared for the encounter, and Everest, stepping forward sword in hand, invited Talbot to the attack.

"Now, then, you man from the mountains, let us see of what material you are composed!" he exclaimed.

"I am ready, sir," Talbot replied, advancing toward Everest, sword in hand.

"You have mortally insulted me, sir, by

making this outrageous charge, and I want you to understand that your heart's best blood alone can satisfy me."

"This is to be a duel to the death. I shall show no mercy, and ask none."

"You had better save your breath for the fight. You will find you need it all before we get through with the struggle," Talbot replied.

The coolness of the admonition angered Everest, the more so, because he felt perfectly satisfied that he held the life of his antagonist completely at his mercy.

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread!" he exclaimed, throwing himself into position. "Your ignorance alone excuses your folly. There is not one chance out of a thousand for you."

"I hold your life in the very hollow of my hand—it is mine to sacrifice, or spare, as I please."

"I will play with you as the cat plays with the mouse, enjoy your agony when you discover that you are hopelessly in my power, and then drive my steel through your heart, and with a single straight thrust send your soul to its Maker."

"Bah! what a man you would be if you could only fight as well as you can talk about it," Talbot remarked contemptuously, advancing and crossing swords with Everest.

It was the intention of the latter to do exactly as he had said, relying upon his skill as a swordsman.

He intended to confuse his opponent with brilliant parades, prick him here and there with the point of his blade, and enjoy his fruitless endeavors to retaliate.

It would be rare sport, and followed by the death of his opponent, would give him full measure of revenge.

For only a moment though, after the keen and shining blades crossed, twining together like two silver serpents, did Everest enjoy these pleasant thoughts.

It was his intention to remain on the defensive for a moment or two, allowing his adversary to attack, so as to discover just how expert a swordsman the other was.

This programme suited Talbot exactly, for it allowed him to carry out the plans which he had formed.

So, hardly had the swords crossed when Talbot's quitted his opponent's and performing a flourish in the air such as no fencing-school had ever seen, gave Everest a sounding slap across the face with the flat of the blade.

The force of the blow for a moment almost blinded the adventurer, and he staggered back in astonishment.

Talbot had not calculated on producing so powerful an effect or he might have ended the struggle there and then, for Everest had been thrown off his guard by the unexpected blow, rendering himself open to an attack and one straight thrust delivered by Talbot's powerful arm would have ended the fight.

Perceiving that his principal was for the moment helpless, Mike hastened to protest against this astonishing way of fighting.

"What are you about?" he cried. "This is not a fight with cudgels but a sword encounter, and the way you have commenced is against all rules."

"Oh, bosh!" cried Bowers. "Take a back seat and keep quiet until the time comes to bury your man. I reckon my principal kin sling swords as well as any galoot that ever flourished a toad-sticker."

"Come up to the scratch, take your gruel smilingly, and get whaled like a man and a brother!"

By this time Everest had recovered from the effects of the blow and he stepped forward with an ugly look upon his face.

He had formed a new plan of attack.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER ADVENTURE.

THE look on Everest's face, when, for the second time he advanced to cross swords with Talbot was altogether different from that which he had previously worn.

The trick which Talbot had so deftly performed had convinced him that he had made a mistake in holding his opponent so lightly and that the task which he had undertaken was not going to be so easy a one as he had anticipated.

And with the caution which was so pre-eminent in his nature, he began to think he had made a mistake in accepting the challenge so boldly delivered by the other.

It would have been better, he began to believe, if he had entrusted the task of making away with this obtrusive Westerner to other hands, rather than undertake to do the job himself.

But he was in for it now, and there wasn't any other course open to him but to face the music and make the best of the situation.

He had a scheme in his mind by means of which he fondly hoped the death of his foe might be compassed.

It really seemed ridiculous that there should be any difficulty about the matter, for an expert swordsman such as he certainly was, ought not to have the least bit of trouble in spitting a novice in the use of the weapon.

But the novel trick that Talbot played was so entirely unexpected that it took him completely by surprise; he flattered himself that it could not be done a second time, for he made up his mind that if his opponent tried the dodge again, he would improve the opportunity and run him through on the instant.

Again the swords crossed, and the bystanders in almost breathless eagerness watched the scene.

Again Talbot's blade left his opponent's, and the moment Everest felt his antagonist "disengage" he delivered as straight a thrust as he could command.

Talbot was on the lookout though, for he hadn't any idea that his antagonist would be accommodating enough to allow him to perform the same maneuver twice in succession.

So he was on the guard for the attack, and parried it as though it had been a single-stick shoulder blow, and then, before Everest could recover himself and stand on guard, Injun Dick dealt him a lick on the head that for a moment made the adventurer see stars, and wound up the attack by using the sword for the first time as the weapon ought to be used.

He lunged straight at the heart of his adversary, and a partially-suppressed cry came from the lips of all the lookers-on as they saw the sword enter the body of the duelist.

Everest tottered for a moment, the look of a baffled fiend upon his face, as he realized that the fight was over, and, possibly, that he had received a mortal wound.

Then the sword dropped from his now powerless hand, and with a groan, evidently wrung from him by extreme pain, he fell all in a heap.

Melancholy Mike and the doctor sprang in haste to the assistance of the fallen man, while Phenix and Bowers pressed forward to Talbot.

"You've settled him for keeps, I reckon!" the veteran exclaimed.

"By Jove! I wouldn't have believed the trick could have been done if I hadn't witnessed it with my own eyes," Phenix remarked.

The doctor knelt by the side of the wounded man, and with a pen-knife cut open his shirt which was already stained with blood.

He shook his head solemnly, and the bystanders understood by this that the worst might be expected.

They could see, too, that the fallen man was badly wounded, for the blood was flowing quite rapidly from the wound.

"You had better get out of the way as fast as possible," the doctor said, addressing Talbot, "for your sword has gone clean through this man's body and there isn't a chance for him to survive the wound."

"That's only one boat," suggested Bowers, who did not see how the thing was going to be managed.

"I'll row you gentlemen to the Jersey shore," suggested Melancholy Mike, "and then return with the boat. It will not take long, and you can get a train on the railroad—it is not far from the shore—which will take you to New York."

"But how about the wounded man?" Phenix asked. "Will he not need assistance?"

"He's past all mortal help, I'm afraid," the doctor answered.

"But you can go ahead and don't worry about him. It will take me some time to bandage his wound, and he cannot be moved until that is attended to, anyway."

"Is he conscious?" the detective asked.

"No, he is in a swoon and the chances are about a hundred to one that he will not awake from it. In fact, I don't think the man has an hour's life in him, and if you'll take my advice, sir," he turned to Talbot, "you will get out of the country as quickly as possible and so avoid unpleasant consequences."

Talbot did not speak; he surveyed the man with an earnest gaze while he was delivering the admonition, and when he finished merely nodded.

Bowers, who had been watching the expression upon Talbot's face, comprehended that something was in the wind from Dick's peculiar look.

And the keen-eyed bummer noticed, too, that there was an odd expression in the eyes of the detective, and he fancied he detected a glance pregnant with meaning exchanged rapidly between Phenix and Talbot.

Neither one said anything, though, but followed Melancholy Mike to the boat.

Mike got in and took up the oars, Phenix and Talbot seated themselves while Bowers shoved the boat off and nimbly jumped on board as it parted from the strand.

Mike was a powerful fellow and an experienced oarsman, and it did not take him long to put his passengers on the Jersey shore.

"If you'll take my advice," he said, after the others had landed, "you will not lose any time in making tracks, for there may be a nasty breeze kicked up about this affair; my man is

done for, I reckon, and if I were you the way I would dust out lively for parts unknown would be a caution."

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you for your advice," Talbot replied, "and as I am one of the kind of men who always follow good advice, you can depend upon my paying particular attention to it. Good-by; be good to yourself!" and with a wave of the hand Talbot bid the man adieu and started after the other two, who had set out to walk toward the railroad station.

"He's a mighty cool hand, and I wouldn't have such a man get on my track for a million of dollars," Melancholy Mike soliloquized, as he started on his return to the island.

"What do you think of this affair?" Phenix asked Talbot, after the latter had joined them.

"Well, from the way the two fellows act I am rather inclined to the belief that by some almost marvelous chance this rascal has escaped serious injury."

"My own thought!" Phenix exclaimed. "They are altogether too anxious to get rid of you. What do they care whether you are brought into trouble or not on account of this matter?"

"Not a particle!" Talbot replied, emphatically. "In fact, they would be rather glad than otherwise to see me laid by the heels, for that, in a measure, would avenge the defeat of their pard."

"But you seemed to drive the sword right through him," the detective observed.

"In truth, I didn't try to spare the fellow, for the scoundrel deserved to be killed."

"But I fancied that my blade struck one of his ribs, for I felt a slight shock as I made the lunge, which seemed to indicate that the blade had met with some hard substance and had been diverted in its course, and so it is possible that though the fellow bled like a pig, he has only received a flesh-wound that will not amount to anything."

"I can ascertain the truth about the matter in a week or so, and until we find out exactly how matters stand, you can lie quiet at my house," Phenix remarked.

"If the fellow is done for and there is a row about the matter, there are some hiding-places in my shanty which I defy all the police in the country to discover. And when the fury of the hunt has abated, I can easily smuggle you out of the city."

"I am very much obliged to you, Phenix, for your kindness, but I do not think it will come to that pass, for I have a suspicion this fellow is playing possum, and that he is not dangerously hurt."

"My idea, too, and I'll soon find out the truth of the matter, but until we discover that, it is better that you should be on your guard."

The advice was good, and Talbot readily admitted it.

No other conversation worth detailing occurred between the three on their homeward road, and they arrived at the detective's house without aught of interest happening to them on the way.

For three days Talbot and Bowers remained concealed in Phenix's castle, and then through his spies the detective made a discovery that confirmed the suspicions that had existed in the minds of Talbot and Phenix.

Thanks to a secret armor worn under a silk, flesh-colored undershirt, so nearly resembling the skin that it could hardly be told from it, Everest had escaped death, although the sword had pierced the armor and given the adventurer a painful flesh-wound.

The hunt was not over—the prey not yet brought to bay.

After this intelligence reached the pards, when evening came, tired of their confinement in the house, they went out for a stroll.

They walked up Broadway until they reached the Park, then turned down Fifty-ninth street, and turning around the corner of Ninth avenue, came suddenly upon quite a striking tableau.

A carriage stood by the curb-stone, and two men, one old and nicely dressed, while the other was evidently the hack-driver, were endeavoring to induce a beautiful young girl to enter the carriage.

"You must go! it is your mother's wish, and if you will not go willingly, then I will use force!" the old man cried.

CHAPTER XXIII.

• ANOTHER ADVENTURE.

SOMETHING in the tone of the old man's voice appealed strongly to Dick's remembrance.

It seemed to him as if he had heard the voice before; it was familiar to him, and yet for a moment he was puzzled to remember the circumstances under which he had encountered the owner of the tones.

The street at this point was quite dark, there being no gas-light nearer than the corner, and the party were all so interested in their own affairs that none of them noticed the approach of the two strangers.

Talbot stopped Bowers by placing his hand upon his arm.

"Wait a moment, Joe," he said. "I fancy I am somewhat interested in one of the parties yonder."

"You don't tell me!" was the veteran's response, rather perplexed by the information.

"Yes. If I mistake not, the party who just spoke is the mysterious stranger who halted at our cabin by the Yanja and inquired the way to Murphy's Gulch on the night of Leaverwick's death."

"I may be mistaken in my guess, of course, and deceived by a similarity of tones, but I would swear to the voice without the slightest hesitation."

"I reckon it is safe enough for you to go ahead; I never knew you to make a mistake about a thing of this kind in my life," Bowers remarked.

"Well, whether he is the man or not, it will not do any harm for us to find out what the trouble is here, for it seems as if everything is not altogether lovely."

The girl and the two men had glided into lower tones for a few moments, but now again their voices became loud as the conversation grew more earnest.

"No, no, I will not go with you!" the maiden exclaimed, in positive tones.

"I do not know anything about you; I never saw you before to my knowledge, and I am sure that if you are the gentleman who took care of me in my childhood, as you assert, I should most assuredly be able to recall you to my recollection."

"My dear young lady, I assure you it is so!" the old man protested.

"Your memory has played you false. You must remember you were only a child at the time, and at such an early age impressions are not so vividly imprinted upon the memory as at a later period."

"Oh, no, sir; I am sure you are wrong," the girl replied, in no way convinced.

"I am certain you have made some mistake. I cannot be the young lady of whom you are in search. My mother would not send for me without giving me warning, and I am not willing to go with you."

"My dear young lady, I assure you you are making a great deal of trouble about nothing," the old man replied, in honeyed accents.

"Your mother was in a great hurry, and did not for an instant imagine that you would not recognize me, and that is why she did not take the trouble to write to you."

"But I do not comprehend," the girl replied, evidently not knowing what to make of this strange affair. "If my mother is in the city, why does she not come herself for me? Why does she send you?"

"Your mother is in great trouble; she is persecuted by a wealthy foe with whom she has long been at war on account of some valuable property left by your dead father."

"She is keeping herself concealed to avoid being served with legal papers, which have an important bearing on the suit which is now in progress to wrest your father's property from the clutches of this bold, bad man, whose wealth has given him such an enormous advantage in this unequal fight."

"Detectives in the pay of her unscrupulous foe are using their utmost endeavors to find out her hiding-place, and if she were to venture from the place where she has found concealment, it is almost certain that her whereabouts would be discovered."

The girl was perplexed; the explanation seemed probable enough, and yet her womanly instinct whispered that there was something wrong about the matter, and so she hesitated to go with the old man, for though he asserted he was an old acquaintance, yet she could not remember him, and was positive that if she had ever seen him it must have been when she was so young that it was impossible for her memory to go back to the period.

"I will be frank with you," she said, after reflecting about the matter for a moment. "I think there is some mistake, and I am not willing to go with you without being satisfied that my mother really desires me to come."

"It will be an easy matter for you to procure a line from her; it will not take long, and the necessity for my presence cannot be extremely urgent."

"You would recognize your mother's handwriting if you saw it?" the old man asked.

"Oh, yes, immediately."

"If I show you a letter in her hand, although it is not addressed to you, perhaps you will be satisfied that I come from her."

"Yes, perhaps," the girl replied, evidently wavering.

"Here is the letter," and the speaker drew a folded paper from the breast-pocket of his coat.

"But it is so dark that I do not believe you can distinguish the writing."

"I think I can."

But the supposition was not correct, and after a moment's endeavor she was obliged to admit as much.

"I will strike a match," and the old man proceeded to fumble in his vest pocket.

"That makes our cake all dough," Bowers whispered in Talbot's ear. "The moment he illuminates the surrounding atmosphere he'll tumble to the fact that we are onto him bigger'n a wolf."

"It doesn't make any particular difference," Dick replied. "I'm going to interview that aged beat sooner or later, and the quicker I get at it the better."

The old man having found a match, ignited it upon his coat-sleeve, and the moment the flame illuminated the darkness Talbot and Bowers advanced.

A half-suppressed cry of alarm came from the lips of the two men when they discovered the presence of the interlopers.

"I reckoned you was my mutton," Injun Dick remarked, as he came close to the old man. "As a rule I don't often make a mistake about such matters, and I thought I recognized you the moment I set eyes on you."

"Eh?" exclaimed the other, drawing himself up with a dignified air; "I do not understand what you mean."

"Oh, yes you do; there isn't any mistake about it; you're the man I want to see. Can you tell me the way to Murphy's Gulch?"

"What do you mean?" growled the old man, casting a hasty glance around as though he meditated making a speedy retreat if the coast was clear.

Talbot perceived the gaze and fancied he understood what it meant.

"Now don't try to cut and run," he continued, "for I'm something of a foot racer myself, and I reckon you wouldn't stand much show at that kind of a game."

"I assure you, sir, I haven't the least intention of doing anything of the kind," responded the other stiffly. "And I am at a loss to understand why you should accost me, as I never saw you before."

"Oh, come! that is laying it on altogether too thick!" Talbot exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, that's too thin entirely; 'tain't wool and won't wash," Bowers asserted.

"You have made some mistake, sir; I do not know you—I repeat, I never saw you before."

"Didn't you stop at my cabin on the banks of the Yampa river in Colorado, a few weeks ago, and inquire the way to Murphy's Gulch?"

"No, sir," responded the old man, immediately. "You are in error. I was never in Colorado in my life."

"My aged friend, I am afraid you are away off from the truth in that statement. You are the man I want and no mistake."

"This is perfectly absurd!" the other exclaimed, indignantly. "You ought to be satisfied when I tell you that you are laboring under a mistake. I am a respectable man—have resided in this city a great many years and can bring a dozen witnesses to prove that for the last six months I have not been absent from New York."

"I will give you my address, and to-morrow you can inquire and satisfy yourself that my statement is nothing but the exact truth."

"Oh, no, you can't play that game on me," Talbot replied. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. I've stumbled on you just by accident, and I don't intend to let you get out of my sight until I ascertain who and what you are."

"That's our platform, and we don't keer a continental who knows it!" Bowers asserted.

"And, miss," added Talbot, turning to the girl who in amazement had listened to the conversation, "I think I have arrived just in time to save you from being lured into a trap."

"I have a strong suspicion that this man is a rascal, and is not at all what he represents himself to be."

"I have strong circumstantial evidence which appears to connect him with a cold-blooded murder, and I do not intend to let go of him until I place him in the safe-keeping of the law."

"Easier said than done!" hissed the old man, and then with a quickness that was really marvelous, he produced a revolver, which he had slyly drawn from a side-pocket, and discharged it full at Talbot's head.

Our hero was caught napping, and fell backward with a sigh-like groan as though mortally wounded.

Bowers, rushing forward to the assistance of his pard, was saluted by a blow on the head from a short loaded club in the hands of the other man, which felled him as though he had been shot.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BOWERS ON HIS METAL.

"At last!" shouted the old man, in fierce glee, as he beheld Talbot go down before his fire.

"Quick! to the box, Murphy, we must lose no time in getting out of this. Into the carriage, you foolish girl, the cause of all this trouble."

And as he spoke, with a strength that not even the shrewdest guesser would have sup-

posed could dwell in his aged frame, he threw his arms around the slight figure of the maiden, and lifting her from her feet, bore her to the vehicle.

"Release me!" she cried, so confused by this unexpected turn of affairs that she hardly knew what to do.

"Release me instantly, or I will cry aloud for assistance!"

"Dare to utter a sound of alarm, and I will blow your brains out on the instant!" the old man replied, fiercely, thrusting her into the carriage as he spoke.

"Not a word, or you die upon the spot!"

He bundled the affrighted girl in upon the floor of the vehicle without the slightest ceremony, and then jumped in after her, slamming the door behind him.

Grasping her by the throat with his left hand, the ruffian, for such he evidently was, pressed her head back on the edge of the cushioned seat, and with the other pressed the cold muzzle of the revolver against her temple.

The muscular hand, grasping her so firmly by the throat, would have been almost enough to have choked her utterances, even without the intimidation of the pistol.

The girl was naturally cool and courageous, but under these awful circumstances she felt that her senses were reeling, and it required the exercise of all her powers to prevent her from swooning dead away.

The confederate of the aged villain had been equally as prompt to act as his chief.

A single leap had taken him to the box of the coach, and in a twinkling he had caught up the lines, at the same time urging the horses onward.

The steeds attached to the vehicle were far better than the generality of beasts that do duty in a like station in our big cities; and being mettlesome animals, full of fire and spirit, they started off at a brisk trot.

It was as boldly planned and as cleverly executed a scheme as the pen of writer ever described, and for a moment it really seemed as if it was destined to be completely successful; but in this uncertain life of ours, the best-laid plans of mice and men do not always command success.

Bowers had been felled by the "billy" in the hands of the old ruffian's assistant, and the blow had been given with force enough to break the skull of an ordinary man; but the veteran bummer had a head of African-like thickness, and the heavy stroke produced no lasting impression upon him.

By the time that the horses were in motion he was on his feet, cast a look at the prostrate form of his pard, and thinking that bold Injun Dick had at last been slain by the foul hand of violence, he determined to do all in his power to avenge his death.

Out came his trusty self-cocking seven-shooter, and he immediately opened fire on the rapidly departing coach.

Bowers was not an extra good shot, no such master of the weapon as Talbot; he couldn't put a dozen shots into the bull's-eye off-hand, and repeat the operation nine times out of ten, but he was "good enough on the shoot" not to miss such an extremely good target as was offered by the coach.

His idea was not so much to hit the men as to disable the horses, and so he aimed low.

The second shot took effect in the leg of one of the animals, and down he dropped all in a heap, bringing his companion down on top of him, struggling and kicking with all his might.

As a result of this lucky shot, the coach came to so sudden a halt, that the driver was pitched clean out of his seat and onto the heads of the struggling horses.

Bowers uttered a shout of joy as he witnessed the success which had attended his pistol-practice.

"Aha, you durned galoots!" he cried. "If I don't bring you to the hangman's rope for this night's work, then my name ain't Joe Bowers!"

Hardly had the speech been uttered, when a marvelous thing happened.

Talbot rose to a sitting posture, glanced around him for a moment as though bewildered, and then catching sight of the coach, sprang to his feet and drew his revolver.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" yelled the bummer, in his absurd, theatrical way, "ain't you dead?"

"Not much, although I reckon I had a pretty close call," Injun Dick replied.

"The bullet must have 'creased' me and so produced temporary insensibility, for I feel no trace of a wound; but we've no time for talk, for it strikes me that we have got our men ahead in a mighty tight place!"

By this time the noise of the disturbance had produced the natural result, and the street was filled with curious people—who really seemed to have sprung out of the side-walks, so quickly did they appear—all hurrying to the scene of the row.

Talbot and Bowers, though, revolver in hand, were the first to reach the coach, intent upon taking summary vengeance upon the author of this outrage.

But the desire was not destined to be gratified, for the old man perceiving all chance of carrying out his plan to a successful termination had vanished, and that if he did not bestir himself the odds were a hundred to one he would be captured, the moment the horses went down slipped out of the door of the coach on the opposite side to that on which the Westerners were advancing, and, thanks to the darkness, managed to make his escape without attracting attention.

The girl, the moment she was free of the iron grip upon her throat, sought to escape.

By a desperate effort she had contrived to retain her senses despite the peril of her position.

And as the old man fled through one door of the coach, she emerged from the other, and fell almost fainting into the arms of Talbot.

Perceiving that the vehicle was empty, and understanding that, for the present, the aged ruffian had contrived to make good his escape, Talbot placed his arm around the girl and gently drew her away, the curious crowd meanwhile pressing forward, some of them to gaze into the coach, and others to endeavor to get the struggling horses free from their harness, and at the same time assist the driver, who, half-insensible, owing to his untimely fall, was in danger of being killed by the frantic beasts.

Talbot and Bowers had been careful to pocket their revolvers the moment they discovered that the chief rascal had given them the slip, and, thanks to the promptness with which they moved away from the neighborhood of the vehicle taking the girl with them, none of the crowd rushing so eagerly to the scene suspected that they had aught to do with the affair.

But what chiefly aided them to escape recognition was the fact that the struggling horses and the peril of the groaning driver, who had got a terrible fall, occupied the attention of the crowd, nearly every member of which was yelling at full strength of their lungs instructions how the rest were to proceed to rescue the threatened man.

"We'll get out as quietly as possible," Talbot observed to his pard, as they slowly withdrew from the neighborhood of the coach.

"It will not do us any good to figure in a police court, and as long as the man we are after has got away, the quicker we drop the affair the better."

"Dick, noblest Roman of them all! you are spitting out solid chunks of wisdom, every time!" the veteran remarked.

By this time a policeman had arrived on the scene of action, and he immediately proceeded to take command.

But no sooner had he laid eyes upon the driver, than he recognized him.

"Upon me would!" the Metropolitan exclaimed, speaking with that delicate brogue peculiar to about two-thirds of the New York police force, "if it isn't Red Murphy!"

"He's the devil's own b'ye, and he's always up to some trick, bad 'cess to him and his big pal, the Old Man, as they do be after calling him."

"Do you hear that?" Talbot asked of Bowers. "The Old Man is the party that we are after. That is what the police and the crooks term him."

"I'm afraid I'm going to faint," the girl murmured, faintly. "My head is beginning to swim around, and I feel very strangely. Take me home, please."

"Certainly," responded Talbot.

A coach happened to pass at that moment, so our hero hailed it, ascertained that it was disengaged, and at once made arrangements for its use.

The girl gave her address, the three got in, and away the coach went; but when it arrived at its destination, and Talbot explained to the vinegar-faced woman with whom the young lady boarded, that she had been suddenly taken ill, that person instantly took fright and refused to permit the girl to enter the house.

"Take her to the hospital!" she cried, tartly. "I've no time to bother with sick folks!" and incontinently slammed the door in Talbot's face.

There was only one thing for the Westerner to do, and that was to tender the hospitalities of Phenix's mansion, which he immediately did.

"My friend's housekeeper is a good, motherly old soul, and I am sure she will take the best of care of you."

The girl murmured her thanks.

Half an hour later she was safe in the house of the detective.

Strange chance which had by means of this young girl brought Talbot in contact with the man he sought.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE GIRL'S STORY.

PHENIX, who happened to be at home when the party arrived, regarded the adventure as being fortunate in the extreme.

"I know Red Murphy like a book," he remarked. "As the policeman said he is a pal of the Old Man. In fact, he has always been con-

sidered by the detectives to be Malachi Everest's right-hand man.

"The other party, the old fellow, I am a little out on."

"I don't know any of the gang that answers to the description at all unless the man is in disguise, and then it is just as likely to be the head fiend in person as anybody else."

"Do you think it is Malachi Everest disguised?" Talbot asked.

"I should not be at all surprised—the circumstances seem to point that way," the detective answered.

"He must be exceedingly clever then at that sort of thing, for I must confess I did not recognize him, and after the experience I have had with him it does not hardly seem possible to me that he could assume any disguise which I would not be able to penetrate."

"This fellow is a genius in that line. I presume to be a pretty good judge of that sort of thing myself, but I have met men of this Everest stamp who have been able to pull the wool over my eyes."

"Depend upon it, gentlemen, if this old man is not Malachi Everest in disguise he is one of his principal men, although I must own he is a new hand to me."

"But, thanks to this adventure, I think you will be able to get some information that may be of value to you."

"From the determined attempt that was made to abduct the girl it is evident that Everest takes considerable interest in her, and if we can induce her to talk freely about herself and her affairs we may be able to get at Everest in a way that he will despise."

Under the care of the housekeeper, who was a kind, motherly old soul, the maiden soon recovered from the effects of the strange adventure through which she had passed.

And when she felt that she was herself again she expressed a desire to be granted a few words with the gentleman who had come so timely to her rescue.

"Certainly," said Talbot, when the wish was made known to him.

So the three gentlemen descended to the parlor—they had been sitting in the library of the detective and the girl was conducted to their presence.

"This is Mr. Phenix, the detective," remarked Talbot, introducing that gentleman, "and it is his roof that now shelters you."

The lady acknowledged the introduction and then the housekeeper discreetly withdrew and Bowers made an excuse to follow her example, for the veteran had a shrewd idea that the girl had something of importance to communicate and he thought the fewer persons present the more freely she would speak.

When she was alone with the two gentlemen she began.

"I am very much in need of counsel," she said, "for I am alone and friendless, absolutely without a single person to whom I can apply for advice."

"Both this gentleman and myself will be glad to aid you to the utmost of our power, I am sure," Phenix remarked, in his grave, fatherly way, so calculated to give confidence to a young and inexperienced person.

"To this gentleman," and she indicated Talbot, "I already owe a debt of gratitude, for tonight he saved me from falling into the power of a man who was evidently a black-hearted and remorseless villain."

"Don't mention it, I beg," Talbot replied. "I had partly, too, a selfish interest in interfering, for by bringing the scoundrel to an account I was only paying off old scores."

"If I mistake not the fellow is a man whom I have hunted clear from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic seaboard, a villain whose hands are red with blood, and who will not receive his just deserts until he feels the noose of the hangman's rope tightening around his neck."

A shudder shook the slight form of the girl when she reflected how narrowly she escaped falling into the power of such a wretch.

"My life has been a strange one, and yet almost utterly devoid of interest," she remarked.

"I am called Fedelia Heverstar, and have just passed my seventeenth birthday."

"I was born in this city, and brought up by an old Englishwoman, a professional nurse, in whose house I first saw the light."

"My earliest remembrance of my mother recalls to me a tall, queenly, beautiful woman, who came to see me at rare intervals, and who never seemed to betray the true affection which a mother should exhibit toward her child."

"As I grew in years I became curious, and questioned Mrs. Higginbotham—that was the name of the nurse—in regard to my mother, but obtained very little information."

"She said she did not know aught of importance. I was incredulous at first, but as I grew older I began to believe she had told the truth."

"Mrs. Higginbotham was a kind-hearted woman, though extremely strict and formal in her ways."

"She was well paid by my mother for taking charge of me. My mother was a widow, my

father having died a few months before I was born, and that was all she knew or cared to know."

"Once, I remember, I plucked up courage enough to question my mother, on the occasion of one of her rare visits, but I never repeated the experiment, for she became quite angry and bade me be satisfied that a comfortable living was provided for me, and she added that though I had never been anything but a source of misery to her, yet she felt in duty bound to take care of me until I was able to look out for myself."

"I had received a good common-school education and when I was fourteen it was decided that I was old enough to make some exertions looking toward my own support."

"A situation was procured for me in a dry-goods store on Eighth avenue, my mother instructing me to be careful not to speak of my family matters to any one."

"The firm into whose establishment I entered was a large one, employing over a hundred girls, and of course among so large a number I was completely lost as it were."

"So long as I attended to my duties in a satisfactory manner no one took any notice of me nor pestered me with curious questions."

"With this firm I have remained, my wages have risen from three dollars per week to eight so that I was able to take care of myself without calling upon any one for aid."

"My mother I have neither seen nor heard of for three years until to-night when this man stopped me in the street as I was on my way from the store to my boarding-house."

"I neglected to mention that just two weeks ago the old nurse in whose house I have resided ever since I was born died suddenly and I was forced to find a home among strangers."

"Through one of the girls in the store I learned of the place where I was treated so cruelly this evening."

"The hard-hearted wretch!" exclaimed the detective. "How would she like a daughter of her own to be so abused?"

"She is not an agreeable personage and from the first she formed an unfavorable impression of me."

"Being of a curious disposition she plied me with all sorts of questions and when I simply replied that I had no story to tell, she took a dislike to me and I could plainly see she believed I was deceiving her."

"This accounts for her harsh treatment of you this evening," Talbot observed.

"Yes, a young girl like myself without either relatives or friends must expect, I presume, to be looked upon with suspicion by narrow-minded people whose distrust is large and whose charity is small."

"But, now, what I wished to ask is this," the girl continued, her voice growing earnest and her face serious.

"My mother has never acted toward me like a mother, and it would be idle for me to pretend that I feel for her the affection which should spring in the breast of a child for its parent."

"All that she has ever given me has been a bare support and she has told me twenty times at least it was not her money that paid for me, but that a sum sufficient for my support until I should be old enough to take care of myself had been provided by my dear father."

"Now, then, if this ruffian really was sent by my mother, will I be obliged to go to her?"

"That depends upon circumstances," the detective answered in his cautious way. "I am not sufficiently posted yet in all the particulars to give a decided answer, but the chances are that you will not be obliged to do anything that will be distasteful to you."

"We must wait and allow matters to develop; meanwhile consider this your home and this gentleman and myself your brothers who will fight your battles to the best of our power."

The maiden was deeply touched by this generous offer and did her best to express her thanks.

After she had retired in company with the housekeeper, Phenix and Talbot held a brief consultation.

"What do you think of the matter?" Dick asked.

"It is a mysterious affair," the detective replied. "The mother and Malachi Everest are evidently connected in some way, although it is just possible that they are not, and that the Old Man had no authority from the mother to take away the girl."

"But it is plain that Everest has some interest in the girl, or else he would not have had adopted so bold an expedient to get her into his power."

"I assume, of course, that this old ruffian was Everest himself disguised."

"Now, by holding on to the girl, we may be able to lure our man into a trap."

"Of course, I know he is a sharp, shrewd fellow, who seldom makes a mistake, but the best of us put our foot in a hole sometimes, and as Malachi Everest is only human, I argue that he may slip up one of these days."

"I'll get after Red Murphy to-morrow, and see if I can make anything out of him."

The detective was as good as his word.

Murphy being badly hurt by his fall had been carried to a hospital, but when questioned by Phenix in regard to the affair, he protested utter ignorance in regard to his company.

His tale was that he had grown tired of leading a "crooked" life, had determined to reform and procured a situation as a hack-driver and the old man had been his first customer, "worse luck!" as he pathetically exclaimed.

Phenix was convinced that the fellow was lying, but he stuck like a Trojan to his story, and the detective retired baffled.

Just a week the detective had sojourned in Phenix's house, when a strange event happened.

It was in the evening, and the three men—Phenix, Talbot and Bowers—had settled down for a quiet game of cards, when the servant brought the intelligence that a lady wished to have speech with Mr. Talbot.

None of them knew exactly what to make of this, for Talbot had not a single acquaintance in the city to his knowledge.

Word was given to show the lady in, and judge of the surprise of the two jacks when Mrs. Beaverwick made her appearance.

She was magnificently dressed, but looked pale and careworn.

"I have come to see about my daughter, Fedelia, who, I believe, is now under your protection, Mr. Talbot," she said.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN ASTONISHING DISCLOSURE.

BOTH Talbot and Bowers were amazed; this was a development which had not been expected by either one of them.

The detective was not so much surprised, for he did not know the woman.

Of course he had heard the story of the Beaverwicks, but there wasn't anything to lead him to suppose that the lady stood before him.

"Miss Heverstar is your daughter?" Talbot asked, as though he rather doubted the assertion.

"She is, and if you do not believe my word, call the girl, and she will affirm the truth of my statement."

"Excuse me, madam, will you allow me to offer you a chair?" Phenix hastened to interpose, tendering the lady a seat in his most gallant manner.

Mrs. Beaverwick looked at the smoothly-spoken detective as though she intended her eyes to pierce into his very soul, but Phenix was used to things of the kind, and bore the scrutiny without flinching.

"I do not think it is necessary for me to be seated," she answered, coldly, "for I do not intend to remain but a few minutes."

"I came merely to get my daughter, and then I will depart."

"In that case, madam, you certainly ought to take a chair, for it is a matter that cannot be settled in a moment," Phenix observed.

"And why not?" she demanded, a stern look upon her handsome features.

"It will surely not take the child long to get herself ready to accompany me."

"I perceive you do not understand the situation," Phenix rejoined.

"You have evidently come here with the idea that all you had to do was to ask for the girl—"

"Certainly! she is my daughter, is she not?"

"So you assert," the detective observed in an off-hand, careless way, "but as the person is now under my roof, and trusting to my protection, I trust you will excuse me when I say I shall require something more than mere assertion before I permit her to depart."

Mrs. Beaverwick first grew red and then pale. There wasn't any mistaking the sense of the detective's clear-cut sentences.

"Call the girl, let her decide!" the woman exclaimed, indignantly.

"If she does not say I am her mother, I am quite willing to depart without her!"

"I perceive you do not exactly understand the position," Phenix remarked, quietly.

"The evidence of the girl is not, in my judgment, of the slightest value. She merely knows what she has been told."

"Something more will be needed to prove that you are actually her parent, and have a legal claim upon her."

"You are quite a lawyer," Mrs. Beaverwick remarked, with a sneer, evidently deeply enraged at the determination of the detective.

"Oh, yes, in my business experience I have contrived to pick up considerable legal knowledge," replied Phenix with a smile, as though he thought the lady intended to pay him a compliment.

In fact the detective felt extremely good-natured, for through the woman he believed he could get a hold on the arch-roguish whom he had been endeavoring to entrap for so many years.

"Well, you will have a chance to use it all if you endeavor to separate me from my child!" the lady exclaimed, tartly.

"I beg your pardon, how may I call your

name?" asked Phenix, in his most insinuating tones.

The woman hesitated and glanced at the two pards.

Talbot thought that it was his cue to speak, and was quick to improve the opportunity.

"This is the lady of whom I spoke," he said, addressing the detective. "Mrs. Leander Beaverwick."

"Ah!" murmured Phenix, surprised by this intelligence, and quickly perceiving how important it was.

"Yes, I was once called by that name," she admitted.

"Yet this young lady's name is Heverstar," Phenix remarked.

"The name of my first husband," she explained.

"Yes, yes, I see, and possibly the contracting of your second marriage is the reason why you pursued the strange course you did in regard to your daughter."

"Exactly; my first marriage was an unfortunate one. My husband and I did not agree and I fled from him before the birth of the child and soon after, before the babe came, he was taken suddenly ill and died.

"He had the grace to make provision for the expected babe, but treated me in the most shabby manner.

"I admit I bore the child but little love, and did no more for it than I was obliged; but she is my daughter, the law gives me the right to her, and when I learned that she was in this house and under your protection, Dick Talbot, I made up my mind to claim her."

Her eyes flashed, and her tone was bitter in the extreme as she looked upon the man who, at not a remote period, had come forward and stood between her and starvation.

"Now that is really a wonder—how on earth did you find out that she was in this house?" the detective inquired, in the most innocent and guileless way imaginable.

The woman hesitated; she fancied there was some trap in the question, and she was determined not to be caught.

"I was told so," she said at last.

"I do not really understand who could have given you the information," Phenix persisted.

"My husband heard that she was here."

All within the room pricked up their ears, metaphorically speaking, at this intelligence, and Bowers muttered under his breath:

"Another husband? Durn me if she ain't worse than the Mormons!"

"Your husband? This, I take it, is number three?" Phenix observed.

"I believe that is a matter that concerns myself more nearly than any one else," she observed, sharply.

"Certainly—of course; and may I ask the name of your present husband?" inquired Phenix.

"I do not know any reason why I should wish to make a secret of the matter," she replied, a hard and stony look appearing on her face.

"Of course not," the detective urged, his professional instinct leading him to believe he was on the eve of an important discovery.

"My husband's name is Malachi Everest."

This was an astonisher for all of the three.

"Malachi Everest," murmured the detective.

"The infamous, black-hearted scoundrel, who murdered your husband, Leander Beaverwick!" Talbot cried, unable to restrain his righteous indignation.

The face of the woman flushed, and then paled; her eyes drooped and a half-shudder ran over her form; but with a strong effort she recovered her composure, and with a defiant expression forced the answer:

"What grounds have you upon which to make such a charge?" she exclaimed.

"You know that it is the truth," Talbot replied, ignoring the question.

"This scoundrel came to our cabin on the night of the tragedy in disguise, and you volunteered to find the trail for him."

"I see now that it was all arranged beforehand."

"You went forth with this wretch to waylay your husband, and you succeeded in your design; your accomplice murdered him; then he robbed the cabin and contrived a mine designed to kill Bowers and myself; but by a miracle, as it were, we escaped, and we have pursued you to the East hot for vengeance!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE WOMAN EXPLAINS.

A WEARIED look came over the face of the woman, and she shook her head impatiently.

"This is mere idle talk!" she exclaimed. "You have not followed me because you believed I had a hand in the death of Limber Bee, but because you were determined I should not enjoy the society of the only man that I ever truly loved."

"Of course, you do not know the story of my life, and therefore are not able to judge me as I ought to be judged."

"Malachi Everest is not my third husband, but my second."

"We were married a good ten years ago, and for a time all went well, and then the demon of misfortune descended upon our humble home, and we were driven to the West to carve out a new life."

"And there, amid wild and rude surroundings, my husband fell, innocently, into bad company. He became the friend and associate of bold, bad men, not knowing them to be such."

"At last the explosion came. The vile wretches were detected and arrested, and my husband with them."

"The villains did not quietly submit to the law's demands, there was a conflict, and in the struggle some of the officers were hurt, one of whom afterward died of the wound which he received."

"My husband was accused of the murder, was tried and convicted—convicted on false testimony, for he was as innocent of the man's death as an unborn babe."

"But the people of the community were so prejudiced that it was impossible to secure a fair trial and so Malachi Everest was sentenced to the State Prison for life."

"Thus was I left alone to the mercy of the world, sick both in heart and body and utterly without means."

"All the neighbors shrunk from me, for I was the wife of a felon, and every one believed I was just as bad as the man who had been sentenced to pass all the rest of his days immured in a dungeon cell."

"At this critical moment in my history, Leander Beaverwick encountered me."

"He had just inherited a small property and became infatuated with me, despite the awful situation in which I was placed."

"By the laws of the State I was a free woman, for my husband's crime divorced us."

"Weak and sick, not knowing which way to turn, I yielded to Beaverwick's importunities and became his wife."

"You, as well as any living soul, know the miserable life I led with him," she continued, addressing her remarks directly to Talbot.

"True, you didn't get on well together, but that was no excuse for your being an accomplice in his murder," Talbot observed.

"As there is a Heaven above, I declare to you I am innocent of all knowledge of the deed!" she cried.

The woman's words seemed to bear the impress of truth, but the circumstantial evidence was strongly against the plea.

"You recognized that the old man was your felon husband in disguise on the night when he stopped at our cabin and inquired the way to Murphy's Gulch," Talbot said.

"I did, and though I was surprised by his appearance yet I did not dream that any terrible event would follow."

"What passed between you after you quitted the neighborhood of the cabin with him for the ostensible purpose of showing him the road?" our hero demanded with the grave aspect of a judge.

"He told me he had come to take me away. He had been pardoned and was a free man again; understanding how I was situated he thought it best to come in disguise and have an interview with me."

"I explained to him that I was lawfully married to Beaverwick, but he laughed at the idea."

"The miserable scoundrel would be glad to sell you for a few hundred dollars," he said, and he proposed that we should go through the canyon and meet Beaverwick as he returned."

"We did so; Beaverwick was in liquor and inclined to be quarrelsome, as he always was when in his cups."

"When he found out who Everest was he flew into a violent passion and swore he would kill him upon the spot."

"He drew his knife and precipitated himself upon him."

"In self-defense Everest struck him, and the blow was fatal."

She had hurried on in her narrative as though she could not utter the words fast enough, but now she hesitated, closed her eyes for a moment and pressed her hands across her temples as though anxious to shut out the vision of the past.

After a moment she went on:

"It was in self-defense—I was a witness to the tragedy—the only witness—and there isn't a jury in the land who would not on my evidence acquit Everest, for it was not murder."

"After the deed was done, we counseled together and concluded that as no one knew aught of the affair it would be best for us to keep our secret and depart from the region as soon as possible."

"We returned to the cabin, and I went to the secret hoard and took one-third of the gold, to which I was rightfully entitled, and then we departed and came straight to the East."

"I had little idea that you, Dick Talbot, was on our track, anxious to bring us to the gallows."

"You have told a plausible tale, and I hope for your sake that the major part of it is true," Talbot remarked.

"It is true! every word of it is true!" the woman cried fiercely.

"Possibly you believe it is, and yet you may be mistaken," the detective observed.

"It is impossible for any one to be mistaken in regard to such a matter. I am only telling you what I know, not what I surmise."

"But you are greatly in error in some particulars," the detective rejoined.

"And extremely ignorant upon some others," Talbot observed, dryly.

"All the gold in the secret hoard was taken, the two-thirds that belonged to Bowers and myself, as well as the one-third, yours by right."

"I will swear that I was careful only to take my third," responded the woman, doggedly.

"You betrayed the secret hiding-place to your companion."

"Well—yes; I took the money in his presence and explained to him that it belonged to me."

"Then you left the cabin?"

"Yes."

"And you did not return to it again?"

"No."

"But your companion did."

"Not to my knowledge."

"Think over the past now—try and remember exactly all that happened," Talbot continued.

"It is as fresh in my memory as though it was only yesterday," she affirmed.

"After you departed, your companion on some pretense quitted you for awhile; he returned to the cabin, helped himself to the rest of the gold, and constructed a mine connected with the candle, so that when I returned and lighted it, the house and its inmates would be blown into atoms."

"No, no, it is impossible; he would not do such a thing."

"I am not asking you to give your opinion in regard to that," Injun Dick exclaimed, severely. "I am only trying to find out if your companion did not leave you for a sufficient time to accomplish such a thing."

There was a pause; the woman hesitated to answer.

"I see that my surmise is right," Talbot continued. "Your companion did leave you, and was absent a sufficient time to lay the trap which was coolly calculated to hurl Bowers and myself to death."

"He did leave me, but it was only for a few minutes," she reluctantly confessed. "He returned for the purpose of destroying all signs of our trail, so that the route we had taken could not be discovered."

"And the plot to murder Bowers and myself at the ford of the Rio Grande, and the attacks upon us in New York, do you know aught of them?"

"Nothing," she replied, sullenly. "I will not say that my husband has not attempted to give blow for blow, for it is only natural for a hunted man to turn and attempt to rend his pursuers."

It was now Phenix's cue to speak.

"Mrs. Beaverwick or Mrs. Everest, as I presume you are more rightly termed," he began, "I begin to believe now I have heard your story that you have been a terribly deceived woman."

"You are apparently ignorant of the fact that Malachi Everest has been for years leagued with a band of criminals who live by defying the laws."

"For twenty years at least the hand of justice has been reaching for him, and if it has not succeeded in grasping him so effectually as to shut off his wretched life, it is because he, the criminal, has been smarter than the agents of the law."

"But the pitcher that goes often to the well will be broken at last, and Malachi Everest some day will meet the doom he so justly deserves."

"I cannot believe that this is the truth," she responded, slowly, yet there was a look in her face which seemed to say that she had a suspicion it was only the truth.

"And do you intend to keep my girl from me?" she continued.

"Most assuredly, until you give up this associating with this outlaw," Talbot replied.

"Dick Talbot, you will meet your death on this Atlantic slope," she prophesied, and then gloweringly departed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ON THE DEFENSIVE.

IT WAS with a sad heart that Mrs. Beaverwick, or Mrs. Everest, as we shall hereafter call her, left the house of the detective.

She was like one wandering in a maze, and the more she reflected upon the matter, the greater became her confusion.

"Can it be true?" she kept asking herself, as she proceeded on her homeward road.

"Can it be that the statement of this detective is true, and the man whom I have loved and trusted all these years is naught but a felon who deserves to be the inmate of a prison-cell instead of walking freely in the sunlight?"

"No, no, it cannot be possible! I will not believe it, but I will do my best to discover the truth."

Upon their arrival in the flat the pair had taken up their abode in the upper part of the city—beyond the Harlem river in a place popularly called the annexed district.

This was formerly Westchester county, but as the metropolis grew great it needed more breathing-room for its citizens, and so took a slice of the neighboring territory.

But calling the annexed district the city did not materially change its appearance.

It was still the country, and in some parts extremely wild and desolate, the houses standing widely apart, and the most of the streets being nothing more than country roads.

Everest had taken a cottage on the very edge of the annexed district, in a by-street, and without another house within hail.

To the woman, used to the wild life of the mining region, it did not at all seem lonely, and as Everest now professed to be an artist—he really was an amateur painter of considerable ability—it was not strange that he should select a situation where he could enjoy nature in her unadorned loveliness.

Everest's tale to his wife was that he had now won a reputation as a painter, and could command a good price for his work.

A thousand dollars for a small canvas was the lowest he said he received, and as he usually finished a subject in two or three months from the beginning, the amount of his yearly gains was ample to support him in good style.

Then, too, he said he speculated on the "street," that vague and indefinite way of getting a living which so many men profess to follow—men who are without any settled employment, but who appear to live tolerably well without doing much work.

Alethea had faith in his statements, and never thought of doubting their truthfulness.

But now the words of the detective had awakened the demon of suspicion in her soul, and all the way home she pondered deeply over the matter.

Was Malachi Everest what he purported to be, or was he a double-dyed villain, who was so skillful that for these many years he had succeeded in deceiving his own wife?

Everest was at home when she arrived, busy in his studio conning the evening journals.

It was a great reader, this Malachi, and nothing in the way of literature came amiss to him, although he chiefly affected newspapers and paid particular attention to the criminal columns.

The moment she entered Everest saw by her face that her mission had been a stormy one, and he laid aside his newspaper, prepared to listen with due attention to the details.

"Fedelia is in the care of Talbot, but in the house of Phenix, the detective; do you know him?" she said, abruptly.

This peculiar beginning put Everest at once upon his guard, and with that marvelous quickness which was so characteristic of the man, he immediately guessed what had occurred.

"Oh, yes, I know and have known him for years," he replied, with a fine expression of contempt visible in his voice.

"I knew him long before he went into the detective business. We came in contact, and I succeeded in getting the best of the bargain, and ever since that time the man has followed me with the bitterest hatred.

"I've no doubt that he will never forgive me for having got the better of him as long as he lives."

"Then he is an enemy of yours purely on private and personal grounds," she said, not exactly knowing what to make of this statement.

"Most certainly," he replied, promptly. "And you must understand, Alethea, that this man is not a regular detective. He is not attached to the police force, but is what is called a private detective; that is, a man who is ready to do all sorts of dirty work, provided he is well paid for it."

"Just the kind of a fellow, you know, who will entice a weak-headed man into the commission of a crime so as to be able to get a chance to win reputation by apprehending him."

"Such men are a blot upon civilization, and ought to be suppressed by law. I've no doubt the fellow attacked me in the bitterest manner."

"He did; he said you were a scoundrel, the leader of a band of desperate men, and had been so for years."

Everest laughed merrily as though amused by the statement.

"A fine detective he must be then, if I am all this, that he has not put a quietus on me long ago!" he exclaimed.

"Why, the doors of a dozen different prisons must be growing wide to receive such a man as he makes me out to be."

"He spoke very bitterly indeed against you."

"No doubt, and I do not much wonder at it. He has been trying to do all in his power to injure me for years, and words are the cheapest

kind of weapons, although they are not generally as effective as blows."

"But, Alethea, to take the trouble to seriously consider this absurd matter, if I was what this braggart affirms, would not the proper officers—I speak of the real police detectives, not such paltry Cheap Jacks as this fellow—have had me under lock and key long ago?"

"It is ridiculous to suppose that a man can keep on in the path of crime for year after year without being detected."

"Talbot accuses you, too, of having returned to the cabin after leaving it with me, taking the rest of the gold and laying a trap to compass his death."

"Yes, yes, I know all about that," he replied, with a touch of impatience visible in his manner.

"With the assistance of this Phenix he managed to hunt me up and forced a quarrel upon me so that I was forced to meet him in a duel."

"I am an expert swordsman and so chose that weapon, thinking I could easily master him, but the fellow has the luck of Satan himself, and left me for dead upon the field."

"Just by a bare chance I escaped with a slight flesh wound although even the doctor thought I was done for."

"You never told me of this!" was Alethea's natural exclamation.

"No, I did not think there was any use in worrying you about the matter so long as I was lucky enough to get out of the scrape."

"As for Phenix I laugh at his malice, but Talbot is worthy of more attention, and I should be glad to put a stop to his pursuit."

"How was it that you came to know that my daughter was with Talbot?" she asked, the thought suddenly occurring to her that Everest had not vouchsafed any explanation on this point.

"By sheer accident only. If you remember you pointed her out to me in the store the other day; the first time that you revealed to me the secret of your daughter's existence, and happening this afternoon to pass through the street where Talbot lives I saw both him and the girl at the window together."

The explanation was reasonable, and the woman did not for a moment doubt that it was the truth.

"So Talbot will not surrender the girl to you?" he continued.

"No, acting evidently under the advice of the detective, he refuses."

A sudden idea came to Everest. He pondered over it for a moment, decided that it was feasible, and then spoke.

"Alethea, how would it do to have Talbot and Phenix come here so we can talk the matter over quietly?"

"Of course, by invoking the law you can gain possession of your daughter as she is not yet of age, but it would be far better to settle the matter quietly if possible."

"I think it would be a good idea," she replied, after reflecting in regard to the matter for a few minutes.

"Are you willing to see them about it?"

"Certainly!"

"Explain to them that we would much rather prefer to compromise than to fight; say to them that I know they are laboring under a misapprehension in regard to me, and that if they will give me an opportunity I feel certain I can explain everything in a satisfactory manner."

"I will gladly undertake the task," Alethea remarked. "I will admit I never felt a mother's affection for the girl, but I am not willing for her to remain under Talbot's care. She is a beautiful creature, and there shall not be any love affair between the two if I can help it."

Everest looked at his wife shrewdly for a moment and then laughed.

"A little touch of jealousy, eh?" he observed. "I had an idea that if I had not turned up as I did Talbot would have succeeded Limber Bee in your affection when that fool idiot dropped into a drunkard's grave."

The woman's lip curled as if in scorn at the idea, but she did not condescend to reply.

The next day she called upon Talbot and made the proposition that he and the detective should come to the cottage of the "artist" and see if some arrangement could not be made.

The suggestion was promptly adopted, and eight o'clock on that very night fixed as the hour.

After the woman departed the three men—for Bowers was present, and was to make one of the party—looked at each other.

"It is a plant—a trap, gentlemen!" Phenix exclaimed; "but in catching us they will find they have caught a Tartar."

CHAPTER XXIX.

EVEREST'S RESOLVE.

THE cottage selected by Everest had not been chosen without a purpose.

As we have said, there wasn't any other house near, and from the upper chamber—the cottage was situated on quite an elevation—a complete view of the surrounding country could be had.

Five hundred feet away in the rear of the cot-

tage was the Bronx river, and the ground sloped abruptly from the street on which the cottage was situated to the little plain through which ran the stream.

This was no new resort of the Old Man but an ancient haunt, and so cleverly had Everest managed it that not a detective on the force had any suspicion that this solitary cottage was the retreat and hiding-place of one of the most desperate band of criminals that had ever infested the great metropolis and its environs.

The place belonged to Malachi, so there was no anxious landlord or prying agent to be found, and as the members of the band were careful never to be seen lurking in the neighborhood of the house in the daytime, the suspicions of the few people who dwelt in the neighborhood had never been excited.

By night it was perfectly safe for the members of the gang to make their way to the house through the desolate neighborhood, for there was very little danger of their encountering anybody.

Alethea had departed on her mission, and Everest and his right-hand man, Melancholy Mike, were alone in the house.

Mike had been represented to Alethea as a Bohemian writer, a man who sometimes was able to be of great service to the painter by procuring favorable notices of his works in the newspapers and it was for Everest's interest to have him make himself free in the latter's house whenever he so felt inclined.

In this ingenious manner, Melancholy Mike's frequent visits were explained.

Alethea though had not the slightest suspicion that Melancholy Mike was aught but what he pretended to be.

Malachi Everest and Mike were old pals; for fully twenty years they had worked in company, and although such regues, as a rule, do not stick together, but are ready on the approach of danger to screen themselves at the expense of their comrades, yet these two had proved their devotion to each other on a dozen different occasions.

And generally it was Mike who sacrificed himself to save his leader.

A dozen times at least, when the two being engaged in some unlawful enterprise, were surprised by the satellites of the law and it was apparent that only one could escape, it was Malachi Everest who fled and Melancholy Mike who remained to pay the penalty exacted by outraged justice.

But Mike never suffered long, for by hook or crook Everest always managed to set him free.

It was a favorite expression of this clamorous crook that there was more than one way to kill a cat.

And if the able criminal lawyers whom Everest invariably employed, the best in the business, could not find some legal loop-hole through which the accused man could escape, and he was condemned to languish in durance vile, then the powerful influence of gold was brought to bear.

Through underhand means the officials of the prison where the condemned man was confined were "got at" and some vital warders were brought to be false to their trust and permit the prisoner to escape.

And when the jail men proved to be incorruptible fellows, stern in virtue, who would not barter their honesty for money, Malachi Everest had been known to reach the very fountain-head of justice, the Governor of the State, and by means of powerful influence brought to bear upon him, secure a pardon for the convicted felon.

It was little wonder under these circumstances that Melancholy Mike was as true as steel to his leader.

Mike had reached the house just as Alethea was ready to depart, and after she had gone he questioned Malachi.

"What is in the wind now?" he asked. "The woman looks as if she had the weight of an empire on her mind."

"She goes forth as an ambassador," Everest replied, a strange sort of a smile playing upon his pale face.

"I don't exactly comprehend your meaning."

"She has gone to see the two men who are pressing me so hotly just now."

"Talbot and Phenix?" Mike asked, looking the surprise he felt at the news.

"The same. She is charged with a delicate mission. These two gentlemanly bloodhounds, you know, are giving chase to me just now in a manner which I despise, and I have made up my mind to put a stop to it."

"Curse them!" cried Mike, savagely; "they are bloodhounds, and no mistake. Why, in twenty years' experience, we have never had anybody give us so much trouble."

"Yes, you are quite right," and an ominous scowl darkened the pale face of the villain as he reflected how closely the pursuers had kept upon his trail.

"And it is not Phenix so much as this scoundrel of a Talbot."

"I little thought, when I first ran across him in the West, that he was destined to play so important a part in my history."

"I begin to see that I rather have made a fool of myself in the last few years in regard to Alethea."

"Well, I thought that you were not acting with your usual long-headedness," Melancholy Mike remarked: "but, then, I hated to say anything about it."

"But my experience has taught me that when a man who is engaged on any important business allows himself to become entangled by a female woman, things are sure to go wrong."

"From the days of the Roman Antony, who at one stroke, for the sake of the dark-eyed Egyptian, Cleopatra, lost the empire of the world, down to our own time, there are plenty of instances to prove the truth of what I say; and I must say that I was sorry to see that you were allowing her to bother you."

"All great men have their weakness, you know," Everest replied, with a sinister laugh.

"And I think I may safely claim that I am a great enough man not to be exempt from the failing."

"But in truth, Mike, this, I think, is almost the only weakness that I have been guilty of in my life, and that is saying a great deal."

"I met her some eighteen years ago, just after I had made up my mind that I could make more money in this life and have a better time by being a crook than by following the straight road followed by honest fools."

"She was a beautiful woman then, as beautiful a woman as my eyes have ever looked upon, and I was fascinated by her."

"I married her, keeping the fact a secret from all the world, took her off to a little country town, and managed my affairs so well that until this infernal Talbot got upon my track she never had the slightest suspicion there was anything wrong about me, although I was unfortunate enough to get juggled in the West a year ago."

"But she believed I was innocent, in spite of that, though she was weak fool enough when things went to the bad to marry a loud-mouthed braggart who pretended to be a millionaire, thinking I was locked up for life."

"Pretty tough thing for her to do."

"Yes; but I was still so infatuated with her that I forgave it, and the moment I got out I went after her."

"After I had been obliged, in self-defense, to put a knife into the drunken fool whom she had married, and whom we ran across by accident in a dark canyon, and we returned to the cabin where she lived, when she helped herself to gold which the party had gathered, she would not take but a third of it because she said the rest belonged to this Talbot and his pal, one Bowers, and from the way she spoke of Talbot, I saw that, to use the common expression, she was clean gone on him."

"It angered me, and I began to see she was a little weak on this point."

"I did not say anything, though, for I was fool enough to think I ought to give her another chance, but I arranged matters so that after we had started on our journey I got a chance to return to the cabin, and I not only helped myself to the rest of the gold, but I laid a trap to send Talbot and his pard to the other world in short order."

"It didn't work, though, for the two fellows escaped without damage, and the way they came after myself and the woman was a caution."

"I doubled like a hunted fox, and happening to run across some desperadoes I knew, paid them to ambush the bloodhounds, but the plot miscarried in some way; they escaped, followed me to the East, and you know how hot they have made it for me ever since."

"Yes; if it hadn't been for the armor that you had on under your shirt on the night of the duel, the fellow would certainly have killed you."

"You're right; and, as it was, he gave me an ugly wound."

"A few days ago I made another discovery in regard to Alethea."

"She had been married before she met me, and had a daughter, now about seventeen, a beautiful girl, to whom I immediately took a fancy, and in attempting to get her into my power I accidentally ran across Talbot, and had a narrow squeeze of it."

"Now I am getting a little tired of Alethea; for a woman who has not scrupled to deceive me as she has, her honest qualms are ridiculous, and I don't propose to bother with her any longer."

"I would rather by far have the daughter, and maybe I will find her more easily molded than her mother."

"Alethea has gone to invite Talbot and Phenix to a conference here to-night, and it is my intention to hurl all three to destruction at a single blow."

CHAPTER XXX. A DEADLY TRAP.

MELANCHOLY MIKE rubbed his hands gleefully together for a moment, and then remarked:

"It's a big thing!"

"Right you are," Everest replied. "I have got up a few big schemes in my time, but this

one is equal to anything I have ever devised, for, mark you, Mike, these two men are by far the most dangerous enemies that I have ever encountered."

"Phenix alone is bad enough, but Talbot is far worse."

"Yes, I agree with you, there."

"Phenix is but a police bloodhound," continued Everest.

"He desires to run me down because I have defied the law, and has no personal motive to urge him on."

"If I was not 'wanted,' he would not bother his head about me for an instant."

"But the other is actuated by a personal motive," Melancholy Mike observed.

"Exactly; and that is why he is far more to be dreaded than Phenix. He cares not whether I am a felon or an honest man; he does not rely upon the law to aid him, but is fully prepared to take vengeance into his own hands."

"He must die that I may live."

"The survival of the fittest," observed the other, with a grin.

"All is prepared; the trap is arranged, and now I wait but for my enemies to enter the snare, and then at one fell blow I compass the death of both of them."

"And you intend that the woman shall bear them company in their journey across the dark river?" asked Mike, reflectively.

"Yes; as I have explained to you, as the poet says, she has committed the greatest of crimes—she has 'outlived my liking,' and now the quicker she is removed from my path the better I shall like it."

"Yes; I don't take much stock in women," Melancholy Mike remarked, in a manner which seemed to indicate he had given the subject a great deal of thought.

"Women are mighty uncertain and apt to be awfully ugly if they once take it into their heads to kick over the traces."

"You are quite right about that, and from the way things are working it seems to me that the time is rapidly approaching when Alethea will be apt to give me trouble."

"She has scruples which are really ridiculous when one considers what a checkered career hers has been."

"I have led a double life as far as she has been concerned for many a long year."

"And she has never once tumbled to the truth," Melancholy Mike remarked.

"Nary a tumble. All the time I have been employed in devising schemes to relieve my fellow-men of their surplus cash she has never had the slightest suspicion that I was not treading the path of honesty."

"And she managed to pull the wool over your eyes, too, in regard to this husband and daughter business," the other observed.

"Yes; she did deceive me, for I had not the slightest suspicion that I was not the first man who had succeeded in pleasing her maiden fancy; and between you and me, Mike, the more I think about the matter the uglier I feel about it," Everest remarked, in a manner which plainly betrayed the irritation he felt.

"Hang the woman! If I had suspected the truth I would have whistled her down the wind years ago."

"But as it is, it is not too late for me to pay her up for her trickery."

"I have tired of her, and intend she shall share the fate of the two men who have been pursuing me so closely."

"She will not only lead them into the trap, but will perish with them when the mine explodes."

"I have taken a fancy to the daughter, too. She is a beautiful girl and when the mother is out of the way, I shall contrive to make the girl mine."

"Will not that be a difficult matter?" Mike asked, with a doubtful shake of the head. He did not believe in this woman business at all and did not think anything but evil would come of it.

"Oh, no, she is a brilliant girl, and although I have not had the opportunity to see much of her, yet, from the little I have seen, I am convinced she is twice the woman that her mother ever was."

"I can win her easily enough when the mother is out of the way."

"I have devised a scheme that cannot fail. It is an old idea, but one that seldom miscarries, and I want you to look after the details."

"All right; I'll do my level best, although I must say that, as a general rule, I think the less a man in our line of business has to do with women the better."

Everest laughed.

"You are disposed to be cynical, Mike," he said. "As a rule, I believe you are right, but women never made any trouble for me, and I have been mixed up with them all my life, but then I never lost my head and allowed any female to make a fool of me, and that is why I have been able to get along so well with them."

"Oh, I suppose it will be all right," Melancholy Mike remarked, but the look upon his face belied his words.

"But now let me show you how nicely I

have arranged the trap to destroy these two bloodhounds who are so eager to compass my destruction."

Then Everest led the way to the cellar of the house.

It was a plain, ordinary cellar, no way different in appearance from the cellar generally found under such a cottage.

There was a coal-place in one corner, a wood-bin in another, and in the center of the apartment was a small square box about the size of those usually used by soap-manufacturers—in fact, the label of a soap firm was still upon the package.

The cellar was lit by a couple of windows, so all objects within the apartment were plainly visible.

Mike had never been in the cellar before, and had no suspicion that there was anything odd or unusual about it.

"Do you see that box, Mike?" Everest asked, pointing to the soap-box in the middle of the cellar.

The other nodded.

"Well, Mike, there's dynamite enough in that small package to blow up a fort."

Melancholy Mike involuntarily took a step backward and surveyed the box with an air that denoted he had a profound respect for the mighty agent of destruction.

"Look on the ground and you will see a wire running from the box to the wall."

"I see it."

"The wire connects with a hammer so arranged in the box that a strong pull on the wire will cause the hammer to fall and explode the dynamite, and a second after the explosion takes place, all that will be left of this house will only be fit for kindling wood."

"It's a big thing," Mike observed.

"Yes, and I fancy that cunning as Phenix is he will not escape this trap, if he is bold enough to accept my invitation, nor will Talbot, I imagine, be long-headed enough to scent the danger."

"But I say, old man!" exclaimed Melancholy Mike, abruptly, as an idea occurred to him, "it seems to me that this little scheme of yours is a great deal like the trick that the old Bible sharp, Samson, played upon his enemies. You will destroy your enemies, but at the same time pull down the house on your own head."

Everest laughed.

"Mike," he replied, "that remark does not do credit to your wisdom."

"What satisfaction would it be for me to compass the death of my enemies if I was obliged to sacrifice my own life in the achievement?"

"Oh, no, that is not my game at all. This foolish woman and the bloodhounds are destined to be abruptly removed to another sphere, but I do not intend to be included in the destruction."

"I have arranged a means of escape; see?"

And then Everest showed Mike a secret tunnel, excavated in the solid earth, which led from the cellar to the low lands in the rear of the house.

There was an old shanty built against the side of the bluff, which marked the mouth of the tunnel.

"We will be in the tunnel when the party arrives; we can hear them enter the house, and when they are fairly in the trap we can pull the wire and hurl them all to destruction."

"The ruins will mask the entrance to the tunnel, and the public at large will set the explosion down to a desire on the part of some of my enemies to destroy me."

"It's a big scheme," Melancholy Mike remarked, in a tone of admiration.

After a few more words of little consequence the two returned to the upper apartments, and Alethea soon joined them with the intelligence that the two bloodhounds had agreed to come that evening.

When supper was finished, under pretense of enjoying a smoke, the confederates quitted the house, but by means of the secret passage under cover of the darkness they easily gained the cellar.

Everest was provided with a dark-lantern, and it did not take him long to prepare to receive his unwelcome visitors.

The preparations being made, the two repaired to the mouth of the tunnel and squatted down like two huge toads.

Shortly there came a ring at the door.

Alethea answered the summons.

"Mr. Everest?" inquired a voice which the pals immediately recognized as that of Joe Phenix.

"Yes, walk in, please," the woman replied.

The visitors, there were two, complied, and no sooner were they within the house than Everest pulled the wire.

A tremendous explosion followed.

CHAPTER XXXI. CRACKSMEN AT WORK.

AND now, in order that all divisions of our tale shall move abreast, we must return to the house of the detective officer.

Both of the bloodhounds who were pressing so hotly on the trail of the "Old Man" had

agreed that it was advisable to accept the invitation given by Everest, but Phenix, with his well-known shrewdness, had determined to take all possible precautions against falling into a trap.

He was well enough acquainted with Everest to be aware that this king of rascals would not hesitate at any means, no matter how bloody or desperate, to remove from his path a foe whose absence was material to his plans.

And so, no sooner had he agreed to accept the invitation and the woman had departed, than he set measures on foot to ascertain all the particulars in regard to the house which he was about to visit.

The young girl was still under Talbot's protection.

Now that Phenix had ascertained that Everest was in pursuit of her, he had advised that she give up her place and accept his hospitality until the man who appeared desirous of persecuting her should be driven from the field.

The detective had not the least doubt that he should not succeed in getting the best of the wily desperado, particularly now that he had the aid of Talbot, whose rare good qualities in a fight of this kind he was prompt to recognize.

Fedelia was content to remain under the protection of her new-found friends.

Her mother had never treated her in a way to lead her to regard her parent with the affection that a child should feel toward the author of its being, and in fact of late years a feeling of aversion had begun to grow up in her mind caused by her mother's peculiar treatment.

It really seemed to her as if her mother was bent upon doing all in her power to show her that she was fairly hated by the parent who ought to have been proud of such a child.

Fedelia was a strange girl, too, in some respects.

She was reserved and distant; her life had been an almost friendless one, for there had been few persons whom she had encountered in her pilgrimage through this vale of tears that pleased her fancy sufficiently to make her wish she could call them friends.

The detective and the Westerner, however, pleased her exacting fancy.

She respected the grave and taciturn Phenix and admired Talbot whose gallant attempt to rescue her from the ruffians who tried to abduct her caused him to appear like a hero in her eyes.

And so it was that she trusted herself unreservedly in their hands, following implicitly their advice.

That the girl would be perfectly safe in his house the detective did not for an instant doubt, for he reasoned that it would be a bold rascal indeed who would attempt to snatch a prey right out from under his nose.

And then the house was well-protected too, although there was but a single man-servant attached to the premises, but he was a middle-aged, bull-dog-like Irishman, as devoted to his master as one man could be unto another, and as he had served for five years as the detective's assistant, he was well-posted in regard to all sorts of tricks and traps.

The housekeeper, who was a muscular woman, "as strong as a horse and as bold as a lion," could also be depended upon to "hold the fort" to the last gasp in the event of an attack.

Then too the house was guarded by as perfect a burglar-alarm as money could procure, besides being connected with Police-Head-quarters by that miracle of modern invention, the telephone.

So in case of any emergency assistance could be readily procured.

There was good reason for all these precautions for the life of the sleuth-bound had been attempted a dozen times at least.

Desperate men who had emerged from long confinement within Sing Sing's cold gray walls sought to "get square" with the untiring pursuer who had run them down.

Relatives of felons who had been brought to the bar of judgment by the detective's power attempted to procure sweet revenge by removing at one fell swoop this terror of evil-doers.

But thanks to the precautions which the detective took, one and all these evil schemes miscarried, and among the dangerous classes of the great city he came to be regarded as a man who bore a charmed life, proof alike 'gainst bullet or knife.

Under these circumstances the detective departed on his mission without a single apprehension that danger could possibly come to the girl in his absence.

But as the best of generals will sometimes lose an important battle through some slight error, so did the acute detective make a mistake in not taking greater precautions to guard the girl who was trusting to his protection.

He made the mistake of underrating the abilities of the man who desired to gain possession of the girl.

But then he hadn't the least idea of how anxious the other was to accomplish this purpose, and from the nature of the case it was impossible that he could have.

So without the least apprehension that watchful eyes were upon him, he departed on his mission, not even taking the trouble to warn either the Irishman or the housekeeper to be extra careful.

All the inmates of the house were in the habit of retiring early, and so by the time the party who had boldly resolved to beard the lion in his den had reached the neighborhood of their destination, all within the detective's abode had retired to rest.

Then came stealthy feet through the silent street.

It was a quiet neighborhood, and there were not generally many travelers on the street after nine o'clock.

The block upon which the detective's house was situated was not particularly well-lighted, and there were plenty of dark shadows to aid in concealing the skulking forms who came prowling like so many hideous night-beasts of prey down the street.

There were two men, muscular and determined-looking fellows, and a little wee bit of a boy.

A tiny fellow, who did not look as if he was over two years old, and yet he strode along like a man, and wore the face of a lad of ten or twelve years upon his shoulders.

Plainly the little fellow was a dwarf, and his age could not be told from his stature.

The three halted in front of the detective's house and peered carefully about them.

"All is serene, eh, Mickey?" observed the tallest and most muscular of the two men, who seemed to be in command of the party.

"You bet!" responded the other.

"You bet!" squeaked the manikin.

"The cop has just passed, and there ain't any danger of his being around here for another hour at least."

"Nary danger," said the second ruffian.

"Nary danger," chorused the dwarf, who seemed content to be but an echo of his companions.

"To work then, and the quicker the better," commanded the leader.

"Everybody seems to be a-gittin' ready to go to bed, and we can crack the crib in no time."

"Mike is at the corner of the street with the coach," observed the second fellow, "and I gave him orders to drive up here in 'bout ten minutes. Patsey is keeping watch at the corner below, so we'll have plenty of warning if any stray cop happens to turn up."

"All correct, and we'll go for the crib."

Up the steps went the taller ruffian and the dwarf, while the other lounged below, evidently to prevent a surprise.

Grasping the manikin in his muscular hands, the "cracksmen" for such the fellow plainly was, swung him up to the stone coping which was over the doorway.

With a dexterity which plainly could only have been acquired by long practice, the dwarf, by means of a "diamond-point," the glazier's tool, cut a pane of glass from the sash, taking it out whole, and then passed through the aperture into the apartment.

The window was guarded by a burglar alarm and the slightest attempt to open it would have immediately alarmed the house; but this novel means of entrance bid defiance to all burglar-alarms.

The moment the manikin disappeared, the tall ruffian joined his companion on the sidewalk and the two sauntered over to the curbstone.

"The kid will do the trick up 'brown," the boss cracksmen observed, with a chuckle.

"To professionals in our line of business, that little cuss is worth his weight in gold," the other remarked.

"He's got a head on his shoulders, I tell you," spoke the other, with the air of a sage.

"If he only had the body to match his head, there's no telling what he couldn't do, but as it is—"

"He'll stretch a rope some day," observed the other, grimly.

"Mebbe, for the imp is plucky as a bulldog, and had just as lief kill as eat."

Then there was silence.

Five minutes elapsed; a rap on the iron lid of the coal-hole in the pavement attracted the attention of the men.

They stooped and lifted the cover. The dwarf had unfastened it underneath. The inmates of the detective's mansion were at the mercy of the ruffians.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN THE TOILS.

PROBABLY never in the history of the burglar's art was a more clever piece of housebreaking recorded.

The coal-hole was not protected by a burglar-alarm.

But what genius would ever take it into his head to suppose that cracksmen in search of plunder would enter the house by means of the coal-hole in the pavement, defended by a strong iron cover fastened by a chain of the same

material, amply large enough to hold an angry bull?

And matching this was the shrewd device hatched by the clever brain of the Old Man, of introducing the manikin into the house by means of the window of the hall bedroom, an apartment which was not at present used by any of the inmates of the house—a fact which the master-scoundrel took care to ascertain before commencing operations.

Everest was a decided genius in his way.

When he proposed to operate in any locality, his first proceeding was to obtain accurate information in regard to the premises and its inmates.

A map of the house and surroundings was drawn, every window, door and passageway being shown, with brief remarks in regard to their fastenings.

A complete description of the inmates of the house was also written out, with all their habits carefully noted, and when all this careful preparation is taken into consideration, it is not strange that the Old Man rarely attempted to "crack a crib" without succeeding.

And this present venture he had planned with more than usual care, for he had an especial liking for all such dangerous games, and to be able to snatch the girl from the care of such a protector as Joe Phenix would be a triumph worth going to considerable trouble to obtain.

Thanks to the plan of the house which Everest had obtained and which the dwarf had studied until he was as familiar with the inside of the mansion as if he had resided there for a year or two, the manikin was able to find his way to the cellar without the least trouble; and so the cracksmen obtained access to the house without disturbing any of the inmates and in spite of the elaborate burglar-alarm.

The voice of the dwarf was heard the moment the cover was lifted.

"Come on, quick," he said. "Everything is O. K."

The tall ruffian descended through the coal-hole into the cellar, dropping into the dungeon-like depths with the ease of a skillful acrobat.

After he had disappeared his pal replaced the cover and resumed his watch, and no one passing through the street would have dreamed that there was aught amiss.

When the tall cracksmen gained the floor of the coal-bin, the dwarf turned on the light of the tiny dark-lantern which he carried and led the way to the upper regions.

The girl occupied a bed-room on the second story, in the rear of the house, and to the door of her apartment the dwarf conducted the boss ruffian.

"It's an easy job," the manikin remarked, with the air of a judge, as the two paused outside of the door and the cracksmen paused to examine the lock.

"It's only a common lock, you see, and there's no bolt on the inside."

"The detective did his level best to fix the house so that the crib would be a hard one to crack, and I guess he thought there wasn't the least danger of any one getting in, and so didn't trouble himself 'bout the inside fastenings."

And the dwarf chuckled as he reflected how easily the sagacity of the "Old Man" had set at naught the precautions of the detective.

"The key is in the lock, too," the other observed after a squint through the key-hole.

"Oh! this is as easy as rolling off a log," the little man observed, with a contemptuous air.

"I don't see why the captain took it into his head to put sich fellers as we are at such an easy job."

"It don't need High Tobys of our stamp; any of the boys jest learning the trade would have done jest as well."

"Mebbe so, and mebbe not," the other replied, too well acquainted with the dwarf's inveterate inclination to find fault to trouble himself by discussing the delicate point.

And as he spoke the cracksmen drew a pair of burglar's "nippers"—as the strong, peculiarly shaped pincers used by these minions of the moon are termed—from his pocket, and seizing the small end of the key which projected on the outside with the nippers, he unlocked the door with the greatest ease, and so carefully was the operation managed that the turning of the key in the lock did not make the slightest noise.

The door being unlocked, the master cracksmen opened it in the most cautious manner, and so well was the job performed that not the slightest sound was heard.

The dwarf entered the room, moving on tiptoes, and his companion followed upon his heels.

Cautiously the manikin allowed the light from his dark-lantern to illuminate the apartment, and as the gloom was dispelled a sight met his eyes that almost made him utter an exclamation of surprise.

The girl sat at a table at the end of the room near the window.

An open book was before her, and she had evidently fallen asleep over the printed pages.

"This is mighty lucky," the master ruffian observed, in a whisper, to the dwarf.

"There's her hat and cloak yonder; you bring

'em, and arter we git her into the carriage we kin put 'em on.

"Then if some inquisitive cop should take it into his head to peek into the wagon, he'll be smarter than the most of them are if he suspects that there is anything wrong, 'cos the gal will look as if she was asleep."

The little man nodded in token of comprehension.

With cat-like steps the ruffian approached the sleeping girl.

She was soundly bound in slumber's chain.

From his pocket the cracksman drew a vial, full of a peculiar-smelling fluid, as was plainly made apparent when he withdrew the cork, and a sponge about half as big as a man's fist.

Saturating the sponge with a fluid, he applied it to the nostrils of the girl, seizing her at the same time with a grip of iron and compressing her throat so it was impossible for her to utter a cry of alarm.

The rude attack woke the girl right speedily from her slumbers, but it was in vain for her to attempt to struggle, for she was like a child in the grasp of the powerful ruffian.

Soon her senses began to reel, too, under the influence of the powerful drug.

Forcibly imprisoned as she was in the grip of the cracksman, she experienced the full force of the dose so rudely administered.

Vain were her struggles, vain the attempt to resist the influence of the powerful drug.

Her head swam around, the light faded from her mind, and she fell back, senseless, in the hands of the burglar.

"She made a plucky fight," the cracksman remarked, in a tone of admiration, "but it ain't no use for to kick ag'in' such a thing as this here cologne, 'cos the human don't live w'ot kin fight it."

"Right you are; but let's git while we are young," the manikin replied, in a brisk, business-like tone.

Then in his strong arms the marauder lifted the form of the helpless girl.

The dwarf with the lantern led the way into the entry, bearing the girl's cloak and hat, and after his companion quitted the room, closed the door and by means of the nippers locked it again, so as to keep the fact of her abduction a secret as long as possible.

Then he glided on in the advance and led the way through the lower regions.

Not a soul did they encounter in their passage through the house, and not the least bit of noise did they create.

When they arrived at the coal-hole, they signaled to their confederate who was on the watch in the street, and he hastened to remove the iron cover.

"Is the carriage to the fore?" the leader asked.

"Yes, right alongside."

"And the coast is clear?"

"Nary a thing in sight."

"Here's the gal then—stow her away as quickly as you kin."

And as he spoke, the ruffian passed the senseless form of the victim up through the hole in the pavement to his comrade, and he hastened to place her in a shabby-looking coach which had made its appearance since the two had entered the house, and was drawn up by the side of the curbstone.

After the girl was safely bestowed in the vehicle, the ruffian returned to the coal-hole.

The other swung the dwarf up to him, and after the manikin had reached the pavement by the aid of his comrade, climbed out of the cellar.

Then the iron cover was carefully replaced. The three entered the coach, and away the vehicle started.

The girl's hat was placed upon her head, and her cloak cast around her, and, as she leaned back in a corner of the coach, it would have required a close inspection to detect that anything was wrong.

"A beautiful job—very beautiful!" the dwarf declared, with true professional pride.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RESULT OF THE EXPLOSION.

THE moment the wire was pulled, whose mission it was to bring the hammer down and explode the dynamite, Everest and his companion retreated as rapidly as possible through the underground passage, for both of them had the fear that some of the falling timbers of the house might descend with sufficient force to break in the roof of the passage and so cut off their escape.

The force of the explosion had completely ruined the house, as Everest had intended, and as he explained to his companion as they hurried through the dark, underground passage, there were fires in three different stoves, the stoves crammed full of coal so that when the red-hot pieces were dispersed by the explosion, the chances were great that they would set fire to the ruins.

"The house is old, and will burn like tinder," the Old Man observed to his pal, as they went onward as rapidly as possible.

"Then, too, I took the precaution to have three full cans of coal-oil, a can to each stove,

and in close proximity to it, so that the moment the explosion takes place a blaze will be almost certain to spring up."

"What is your idea of that?" Melancholy Mike asked.

"To destroy all traces of the tragedy which has taken place," the other replied.

"Although I have owned the cottage for years, no one knows that it is my property, with the exception of yourself."

"I bought it under an assumed name and have always been known in the neighborhood by that name."

"Now it is just possible that Phenix and this Western bloodhound have not told any one they were coming here to-night."

"Success sometimes makes men over-confident, and they have run me so closely they may have got the idea into their heads that I was about at the end of my rope."

"If they have not taken the precaution to post their friends in regard to this trip to-night the manner of their taking off may remain a mystery."

"That's true enough," Mike remarked, amazed at the depth of the plot which the "Old Man" had concocted.

"If the ruins of the house take fire, as I feel sure they will, the chances are a hundred to one that recognition of the bodies of those who perished in the explosion will be rendered impossible, for merely charred bones will remain."

"Now, are not the odds great that all will believe that I, the master of the house, perished, and if they succeeded in discovering that there were two men in the house at the time of the explosion, will it not be likely when inquiry is made that it will be believed that the bodies are yours and mine, for your presence in the house to-day was known to some of the neighbors, for I saw two of them passing when I admitted you this afternoon."

"Oh, there ain't much doubt about that," responded Mike, more and more impressed with the ingenuity of the carefully planned scheme.

"It's a horse to a hen that it will work as I have described!" Everest exclaimed, decidedly.

"And, therefore, until this affair blows over and curiosity dies away, you and I must be among the missing."

"This part of the country must know us no more."

"We can easily keep shady."

By this time the two had reached the end of the secret passage, and emerging into the shanty, passed through it into the open air.

As Everest had anticipated, the ruins of the house were in a blaze.

As they were under the hill they could not see the house itself, but the flames were beginning to light up the sky, and people, attracted by the sight, were hurrying to the spot from all directions.

"We must get out before the flames illuminate the night sufficiently to allow any one to recognize us," Everest remarked.

"In such a case as this, unless a man is careful, some unlucky accident is sure to upset all calculation, so we'll be off as fast as possible."

"Yes, that will be the wisest course," Mike observed. "We can watch the fire from a distance as well as though we were near at hand."

And the two, too prompt to let the action wait upon the word, turned their backs upon the flames and set off in the direction of Harlem.

"We will not take a car until after we cross the river and get into the city proper," Everest said, "and so we will avoid all chance of recognition."

The two avoided the roads and struck across the fields, and halted not to look behind until they had covered fully a mile.

Then they paused and glanced back.

From where they stood they commanded a full view of the ruins which were blazing fiercely.

"In an hour or so there will be nothing there but ashes!" Everest exclaimed, with an accent of fierce joy.

"And with the death of these two men I remove from my path the only enemies whom I have reason to fear."

"The weak fool of a woman, too, who was cunning enough to deceive me all these years, who strained at gnats and swallowed camels."

"She was such a goodly creature that I never dared to reveal to her my true character; I acted a lie to her all this time, and now I just discover that she was deceiving me in regard to her past life all the time."

"I am well rid of the weak fool, and in the smiles of her daughter I have no doubt I shall be able to find consolation."

"Suppose you find that she has the same foolish notions about honesty and such stuff as her mother?" Melancholy Mike asked, shrewdly.

"Why, then, I will whistle her off down the wind to shift for herself too," Everest replied.

"Don't fear, old pal, that I shall ever again make a fool of myself for the sake of any woman."

"This was the one infatuation of my life. It has lasted a long time, stood in my way not a little, but at last has come to an untimely end."

"Glad to hear you say it; now you're talking sense," Melancholy Mike remarked, approvingly.

"But I say, ain't the old house making a blaze?"

"Yes, it is the funeral pyre of two of the most bitter enemies that fate ever put upon the track of a human since the world began."

"I didn't like to confess it, old fellow, even to myself, but I really began to be afraid that these bloodhounds would succeed in catching me by the throat at last."

"Phenix is bad enough; but this wild West-erner, who has followed me with the dogged perseverance of a red Indian, was the one I dreaded most."

"But come, let's push on."

"We can read all about the fire and the speculations in regard to who perished in the flames in to-morrow's paper."

"The reporters will scent an item of this kind as a hungry vulture scents the carrion upon which he feeds. These newspapers are great institutions."

"I believe you," responded Mike, and then again the pals proceeded on their way.

They arrived at Harlem bridge without having had the ill-luck to encounter any one whom they knew, and on the city side of the bridge took a car on the elevated railroad and were soon on their way down-town.

Nothing of interest transpired on the trip, and at Thirty-fourth street they took the branch road to the ferry, and crossed the East river to the Long Island side.

The ferry crossed, they took the horse railroad, which runs parallel with the river, and journeyed toward Astoria.

There were few passengers on the cars and the way was a lonely one, and after a twenty minutes' ride the two alighted and made their way to a massive stone house which stood halfway between the street and the river.

The house was surrounded by a large garden, heavily overgrown with shrubbery, and that in turn was encompassed by a high stone wall.

The place was an ancient one; had evidently been a fine estate in its day, but lack of care and the destroying hand of old father Time had made sad inroads upon it.

This was another one of Everest's retreats.

The master scoundrel had fully a half-dozen.

They were expensive, but afforded him protection at times when protection most was needed.

And having these retired haunts to which he could retreat when the great cities became too hot to hold him, may be ascribed, in part, the singular success which Malachi Everest had had in escaping from the many snares which enterprising detectives had set to catch him.

The house was an isolated one, hardly a neighbor within call, and therefore for certain purposes could not be surpassed.

There was an old, weather-beaten man in charge of the massive wooden gate which afforded entrance to the grounds, and he had his quarters in a small cubby-hole of a house right by the gate.

This man was an old crook whom Everest had picked out of the gutter and fairly saved from starvation, and therefore he was devoted to him.

"There will be a carriage along to-night,"

Everest remarked to the porter as he entered.

"So when you get the proper signal, open the gate so they can drive in."

"All right, sir," responded the old man.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FEDELIA'S ADVENTURES.

THE girl had been assaulted so dexterously that before she had sufficiently awakened from her slumbers to comprehend what was going on, she was plunged into the trance-like state produced by the powerful drug which had been administered to her.

So the assault seemed like a troubled dream such as haunt the couch of a sick person, a vision so real and so horrible that the dreamer cries out in agony, and wakes to find the brows bathed in perspiration.

Having an abundant supply of the subtle fluid, so antagonistic to human life, with them, the ruffians, who by long practice had become as expert as doctors in the administration of the drug, kept the girl under its influence until she was placed in the apartment destined for her.

Slowly the girl awoke to consciousness, and as her senses returned she stared blankly around her.

That she was not in her own apartment in the detective's house, but in a strange one upon which her eyes had never rested before, was apparent to her as soon as she had recovered sufficiently to note her surroundings.

She was lying upon a sofa in quite a large apartment, which, however, was scantily fur-

nished, although all the furniture in the room was good, though old-fashioned, the relics of a past age.

There was only a large center-table in the center of the room, the sofa upon which she reclined, and a couple of chairs.

A gas-light hung from the ceiling over the table, and a single burner being lit, illuminated the room.

There were two windows in the room, both concealed by heavy, old-style damask curtains, and when she arose to her feet for the purpose of gazing forth, that she might ascertain where she was, she discovered that the windows were guarded by heavy iron bars upon the inside.

The girl recoiled in horror, for her first thought was that she was the inmate of a prison.

But then, though she had never been inside of a jail in her life, yet from her reading she knew that prisons were not furnished in the style her apartment boasted.

What did it mean?

The view from the window was a rural one, trees, shrubbery and grass, but no houses or any other signs of human existence.

Then she proceeded to try the doors.

There were two in the apartment, one at each end.

The first one, a massive oaken affair, was securely locked, evidently from the outside, for there was no key visible.

The other led into a small room, a bed-chamber, nicely fitted up, but in antique style, like the main apartment.

More and more perplexed, Fedelia returned to the main room and was amazed to find that during her brief absence a visitor had arrived.

A middle-aged man, with iron-gray hair and a heavy beard of the same hue, dressed completely in black, which gave him a ministerial aspect which was still further enhanced by the gold-bowed spectacles which were perched upon his nose.

The gentleman had seated himself by the center-table, apparently to wait for the coming of the inmate of the apartment.

When the girl arrived he rose and bowed in the most respectful manner.

Fedelia was puzzled.

This gentleman, with his grave and rather pleasant face, could not be a jailer, or else all she had read upon the subject was utterly wrong.

"Good-evening, miss," he said. "How do you find yourself this evening? Allow me the pleasure of offering you a chair."

And then, with all the courtly grace of the old-school gentleman, he brought a chair and placed it a short distance from his own.

Almost mechanically the girl accepted the attention.

She was so bewildered by the strangeness of the affair that she hardly knew what she was doing.

"Now if you will let me see how your pulse is, please."

And he took out his watch and held out his hand as though this was all a matter of course.

Again Fedelia complied, although she knew not why, except there was a tone of gentle command in the voice of the stranger that seemed to win obedience.

"So, so," he said, apparently communing with himself fully as much as with the lady.

"Not quite so much fever to-night."

"The change is for the better. I was sadly afraid this morning that you would be worse to-night, and I am glad to see that I was wrong in my conjecture."

"This morning!" ejaculated the girl, who knew not what to make of this strange affair.

"Why, I never saw you before, sir, to my knowledge."

"Certainly not—certainly not, my dear," he remarked soothingly, in precisely the same tone that one would use to a refractory child.

"But why did you say that my pulse was better than it was this morning? How can you know anything about it if I did not see you?" the girl demanded, amazed, and a little annoyed by the peculiar manner in which the old gentleman had spoken.

"Oh, well, we will not discuss the subject," he replied, in precisely the same soothing tone that so offended her.

"Why not discuss it when there is evidently some mistake?" she demanded, spiritedly. "I am not a child, and I do not like to be treated like one."

"Certainly not, my dear, and no one shall treat you in that manner," and then he leaned back in his chair and smiled beamingly upon her through his spectacles as though he expected her to be completely satisfied with this assurance.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded impetuously. "Why have I been brought here, and what kind of a place is this where there are bars upon the windows just as if it was a prison and the door is kept locked?"

"I see, I see, you are beginning to notice your surroundings; that is a good sign—that shows decided improvement," and the old gentleman rubbed his hands softly together in a manner that greatly irritated the girl.

"Beginning to notice!" she cried, indignantly. "As soon as I recovered my senses I began to notice, of course."

"But I do not understand this—what am I doing here, and how comes it that I am in this place?"

"Where is Mr. Talbot and Mr. Phenix?"

"Mr. Talbot and Mr. Phenix!" and the old gentleman shook his head gravely.

"There comes in your delusion again. Those two names have been continually on your lips during the last month."

"During the last month!" almost shrieked the girl, so amazed was she by the statement.

"Why, sir, what are you saying? I have not known either of the gentlemen for a month!"

"In your imagination, child, I mean."

"In my imagination?" she repeated, in bewilderment.

"Yes, of course; are you sufficiently in possession of your senses to understand that no such persons exist?"

"No such persons exist?"

"Certainly not; they are only creatures of your disordered brain."

And now, all of a sudden the truth flashed upon her.

"Great heavens!" she cried, do you believe that I am insane, and is this a mad-house?"

"Oh, dear, no," and the old gentleman blandly rubbed his hands together again. "Oh, no; you are not crazy. You couldn't talk with me as sensibly as you do, if you were out of your mind."

"But, as the poet says, you are troubled a little with thick-coming fancies."

"They do not amount to anything, my dear. Little, simple delusions, you know; time and rest will work a cure beyond the shadow of a doubt."

The girl was so excited at this confirmation of her awful suspicion that she felt for a moment as if her brain would give way beneath the shock, but she struggled bravely against the feeling.

"Oh, this is terrible!" she cried. "I am in a mad-house, and you, I suppose, are one of the doctors?"

"That is my profession; but this is not really a mad-house, my dear young lady."

"This is a sanatorium—a retreat, established and kept by one of the most eminent physicians of the day."

"No common mad cases are received here, only patients troubled with slight brain disorders, who require care and seclusion more than anything else."

"But who placed me here?" the girl demanded, abruptly, as the thought came to her that some one must have acted in the matter.

"The party who has the best right to do so."

"My mother!" the girl cried.

"Yes, my dear, your good mother, who is sorely troubled by your sickness."

"No, no, it is a trick—"

"A trick?"

"A terrible plot!"

"A plot?"

"Yes, yes, I am a victim!"

Hardly had the words escaped her lips when the door was violently burst open. The doctor sprang to his feet.

CHAPTER XXXV.

TRAPPED AT LAST.

The doctor was evidently alarmed and plainly exhibited it.

And he had cause for alarm, too, for into the room strode the three men whom he most dreaded to see.

As for the girl, she recognized that rescue was at hand and with a scream of joy she greeted the new-comers.

"Oh, I am saved!" she cried, as she sprang toward them. "Heaven itself has sent you to my aid."

The reader has probably guessed who were the three men who had come so timely to the rescue of the girl.

It was Phenix, Talbot and Bowers.

As if by a miracle they had escaped the fiendish trap which had been set for them.

How they escaped the reader will see anon.

Phantoms from the grave could hardly have astounded the "doctor" more.

The three shook hands warmly with the maiden, for it was a joyful moment for all of them.

"By a lucky accident we were enabled to get upon your track and so we were able to balk this scoundrel of his prey!" the detective exclaimed.

"The doctor!" Fedelia exclaimed, not exactly knowing what to make of the hostile manner that her friends exhibited toward the bland and oily physician.

"Doctor, eh?" the detective remarked; "is that his little game now?"

"What do you mean, sir, by such language?" the "doctor" demanded, with becoming dignity.

"Oh, it's of no use for you to try to pull the wool over our eyes!" the sleuth-hound rejoined.

"The jig is up, and you might as well know and admit it first as last."

"You are in my house, remember, gentlemen, and I will not submit to any more insolence!"

Although driven to bay the man felt disposed to make a good fight, and was determined not to submit without resistance.

"Yes, we are in your house, and with a squad of detectives surrounding the premises, too," the detective replied.

"We have captured every man of your gang on the place, and have them all securely handcuffed."

"There's a coach outside for you," he continued, addressing the girl, "and this gentleman,"—he indicated Bowers—"will conduct you to it. Inside of an hour you will be safe at home."

A bitter curse rose to the lips of the baffled man, and he made a movement as though he would attempt to detain her, but a significant gesture from the detective restrained him.

Fedelia left the room escorted by the veteran.

"And now, Old Man, to give you the title common to the members of your gang," the detective said, "you might as well take off that wig and beard, for all disguise is useless now."

"This last trick of yours by which you attempted to send us up a peg or two in the world miscarried, and through the failure we were able to get promptly on your track."

"It is the old story over again, the engineer 'hoist by his own petard.' Your 'chickens come home to roost.'"

Slowly the man removed the spectacles, then the gray wig and whiskers, and Malachi Everest stood revealed.

"Well, I believe I will have to admit that at present you seem to have a little the best of the game," he said, as he placed the articles on the table.

"I confess, too, that I do not understand what you mean when you say I wanted to elevate you in the world."

"You do not know, then, that your cottage on the hill was blown up by dynamite to-night, and then the ruins took fire, and in an hour nothing remained but a heap of smoking ashes?"

"Is it possible?" and so good an actor was he that he really looked surprised.

"Oh, yes, you are surprised at the intelligence no doubt."

"Yes, I am amazed, and it will cost me a trifle, too, for I was not insured."

"You invited us to a conference there to-night for the express purpose of destroying us."

"Nonsense! I gave you no invitation."

"Your wife brought it."

"She will not say so when confronted with me."

"Very likely, as she will never speak more in this world, so you are perfectly safe in saying that."

"Was she hurt?" he inquired, affecting to feel anxious.

"She is dead."

"My poor girl!"

And the speaker covered his face with his hands, but the action did not deceive the others.

"Oh, that is altogether too thin," Phenix exclaimed, in a tone of contempt. "You know well enough that you planned her death. I suppose she was beginning to tumble to your little games, and you fancied that the best way to insure her silence would be to close her mouth forever with the great seal of death."

"This accusation is absurd!" the master rascal exclaimed in contempt.

"Oh, is it?"

"Most certainly, and I defy you to prove that I had any hand in this affair—if any such thing really occurred, and I am not certain in my mind about it."

"This may be all a yarn of yours intended to get me in a trap. I am not so sure of the honesty of you detective chaps. I know that it is a common game of you bloodhounds to pretend to the man whom you desire to entrap that you know all the particulars of the crime for which the poor devil is wanted, and he, thrown off his guard and thinking that there isn't any use of keeping silent so long as all is known, like a fool makes a clean breast of it, gives himself dead away and so, by his own babbling tongue thrusts himself into prison and his neck into a halter mayle."

"But you are not fool enough to do that, eh?" the detective inquired.

"You are right, I am not."

"Well, as a general thing, I don't usually show my hand until the last minute, nor allow my opponents to see the game I am going to play," Phenix observed, slowly.

"But on this occasion my hand is so full of trumps that I don't mind allowing you to get a glimpse of it."

"You are extremely kind," sneered Everest, but for all his tone of bravado he was seriously alarmed by the confident manner of the detective, for he knew Phenix by reputation only too well.

The detective, unlike some men of his calling,

was no empty talker—not given to either brag nor bluster, but a quiet, resolute fellow who preferred to allow his deeds to speak for him.

In all his long career of crime, this was the most serious situation that Everest had ever faced.

The escape of the Western sleuth-hounds from the death trap that he had so carefully planned for them was unaccountable.

He was as positive as he could well be of anything which he had not really seen with his own eyes that he had heard Talbot and Bowers pass through the front door into the entry of the house; that is, two men had applied for admission, and when the woman let them in he had distinctly recognized Talbot's voice.

If it was Talbot, and he was in the entry at the time of the explosion, if the woman had been killed, by what miracle had he escaped?

"Oh, not all; I only want to show you that you are out of your reckoning when you assume that I haven't any case in this instance."

"Go ahead!" Everest exclaimed, in the most reckless and careless manner imaginable.

"When the woman brought the invitation, I suspected at once that it covered a trap, a sort of 'won't you walk into my parlor,' said the spider to the fly' business."

"I counseled them to pretend to accept the offer, though, and at the same time determined to put a watch on the house so as to find out just what little game you were trying to play."

"You are a paragon of a detective!" cried Everest, in his most sarcastic manner.

"Well, I don't claim much, and in this case, if fortune had not favored me, I should not have been able to accomplish anything."

"But hardly had myself and party placed ourselves in ambush when two men came along, bound for your house."

Everest drew a long breath and listened with all his ears.

"Two men for whom the rope of the hangman has been waiting for a year or more."

"I would have sprung forward and secured the scoundrels, had not one of them chanced to speak as he passed me."

"I listened with amazement, for his voice bore a strong resemblance to the voice of Mr. Talbot."

"Then the idea flashed upon me to let the men go on, thinking that you might be deceived by the voice and spring your trap."

"The two men who walked to their death were Bud McNulty and Dutch Karl. One was killed outright, the other is badly wounded and will turn State's evidence."

Everest stood like a statue.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

KEEPING THE OATH.

"So you see at last you are fairly trapped," the detective concluded, in his quiet, yet expressive way.

"I have been after you for a long time, and I will not attempt to deny that you have given me a deuce of a chase, and more trouble than any ten men I ever encountered; but you are run to earth now, like the fox that you are."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" asked the hunted man, growing white in the face, a sure sign with him that passion's fires were raging fiercely in his veins, and as he spoke he surveyed the bloodhounds who had pursued him so closely with a malignant glare.

"Yes, yes, you are safe to bet all your wealth on it. At last I have you dead to rights, and I flatter myself it is rather a feather in my cap, too, for I am about the first detective that ever succeeded in getting a hold on you," Phenix replied, placidly.

"I don't know, though, as I ought to claim much credit for myself in the affair," he continued, after pausing for a moment as if to reflect upon the matter.

"For had it not been for this gentleman," and he nodded to Talbot, "I am not certain that I could have accomplished this much-to-be-desired result."

"You will pardon if I am somewhat dull of comprehension," Everest remarked, having choked back his anger, and in a measure recovered his composure, "but I am not able to perceive that I am in a particularly bad hole."

"I have been in worse scrapes than this in my time, even if all you have said is simply the truth without the least bit of exaggeration."

"You charge me with certain crimes; perhaps you will be able to prove that I am guilty, and perhaps you will not be as successful in the attempt as you firmly believe."

"I have money and influence, and your own experience in New York must have told you that it is a difficult matter to bring to grief in this city a man as well-heeled as I am, even if guilty of worse crimes."

This was true enough, and the detective was well aware of the fact, but he put the best possible face on the matter.

"It isn't so safe to count on that as you seem to think," he rejoined.

"My experience is that though a rascal may succeed in going unwhipped of justice once in a while, yet in the long run he will be brought to book."

"You ought not to complain, you have had a long run of it, and have managed to successfully defy the law for a good many years."

"But all mortal things must have an end, you know; you cannot in reason expect such a run of luck to hold out forever. The pitcher that goes often to the well will be broken at last."

"An old adage, but one that does not always come true," Everest replied contemptuously.

"I'll give you a far better fight than you think, and I am quite ready to bet you a good round sum that you will not succeed in downing me as completely as you fancy."

"I'll take that bet," Talbot observed, promptly, "and I'm ready to cover all the money that you can put up. I am not betting on the law, though, but on myself."

"You may escape the agents and ministers of justice, but you will not escape me. I'll run you down at last even though you should attempt to escape me by flying to the ends of the earth!"

"Quite dramatic—a regular romance!" sneered Everest, in contempt.

"I suppose you have registered an oath and all that sort of thing."

"You're right, I have, and I'll keep it too," Talbot replied, quickly. "I'll have your life if the law does not step in between us."

"It's a great pity that you did not trust to your own exertions without calling upon the law to aid you," the master rascal remarked with another sneer.

"So I would if you had been a man with any pluck, but when a man is dealing with such a craven cur as you are he is obliged to use all sorts of weapons."

"Why do you apply such a term to me?" Everest asked, growing white with rage.

It was wonderful how the taunts of this cool and quiet Westerner excited him, and yet he was wont to be a man of ice with nerves as true as steel.

"I faced you once, sword in hand, and though by a trick you succeeded in proving the victor in the fight, yet I am not aware that I exhibited any signs of cowardice."

"Because you had your precious person protected by armor," Talbot rejoined, immediately. "Otherwise you would not have dared to encounter me."

"And you kin bet ducats on that, too!" exclaimed Bowers, who had been eager and anxious to put in a word for some time.

"You don't dar' to strip now 'cos you know you've got sheet-iron all over you; and the brass in your face, too, is powerful enough to turn any pistol-ball that was ever molded."

"Phenix, you don't dare to give me a chance to meet this man now in a fair and open fight!" Everest cried, in a rage, turning to the detective.

"Oh, yes, I do," Phenix replied. "That is a matter that you two can settle between you. I am not employed by the law, but am in his pay, and if he chooses to get satisfaction in that way I am perfectly agreeable."

"Good! I am glad of it!" Everest exclaimed, apparently with a great deal of satisfaction.

"And now, you Western bloodhound, if you are half the man you pretend to be I dare you to meet me in single fight."

"I am armed with a six-shooter and I presume you are not without a revolver. We can adjourn to the garden and settle our little matter there once for all."

"The moon is up full and strong and will afford us ample light, and as for armor, look!" and as he spoke he opened his vest.

"Now come, you loud-mouthed fellow," he said to Bowers, "and see if you can discover any armor here."

The veteran did not hesitate to make the examination, and was obliged to admit there wasn't any breastplate beneath the shirt.

"Good solid flesh and no mistake!" he said, as he hit Everest a thump in the breast that made him wince.

"We'll adjourn to the garden. You remain by the house, I'll walk off a hundred paces while Phenix counts ten, and after the word ten is spoken we are at liberty to advance and fire as soon as we like, and the fight to be kept up until one of us is unable to continue it."

The conditions suited Talbot and he agreed to them at once.

Then they all proceeded to the open air without delay.

Talbot took a position at a corner of the house.

"No motion to draw or fire until the word ten is spoken," Everest enjoined.

"All right, it is understood," Talbot replied.

"Go ahead, Phenix!" Everest commanded, as he walked leisurely toward a little summer-house which was about a hundred yards away.

Phenix began:

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten!"

When the last word was spoken Everest was about a yard away from the summer-house,

but instead of turning and facing his opponent he darted into the house, and pulling up a trap-door in the floor, descended rapidly.

It was plain now that the trap-door led to some secret passage, and that the invitation to battle was but a pretext on the part of the outlaw to afford him an opportunity to escape from the snare in which he had become entangled.

All of the party were taken completely by surprise, for none of them had the slightest suspicion that the desperado, thus cunningly entrapped and brought to bay, was not willing to yield to circumstances and acknowledge himself conquered.

Even Talbot was caught off his guard so he only had time to fire a snap-shot at the King of Crooks as he disappeared through the trap-door, and though Injun Dick seldom missed even such hastily executed shots, yet this time, as the fugitive had dove through the opening with almost as much rapidity as a pantomime actor on the stage vanishes from sight, he had serious doubts as to whether he had hit his man.

Melancholy Mike laughed outright at the discomfiture of the bloodhounds.

"Aha! it is early you will have to rise in the morning to put salt on the tail of such a bird as Malachi Everest!" he exclaimed.

Talbot and Phenix, closely followed by Bowers, rushed to the summer-house, anxious to pursue the fugitive, although they were too keen-witted not to suspect that the trap-door through which the villain had escaped, was arranged in such a way as to impede pursuit.

The suspicion was correct.

The trap-door was iron, and all the efforts of the pursuers could not move it in the least.

Melancholy Mike had followed them, eager to see if they would succeed in the pursuit.

It was not often that Phenix betrayed that he was annoyed at any misadventure, but on this occasion he could not conceal his displeasure at the escape of the man whom he had so cleverly entrapped, and he turned to Mike.

"Here, you know the secret of this trap-door!" he cried.

"Show me how to open it!"

"Upon my word I don't know anything about it!" Mike protested.

"Oh, that is too thin!" Phenix added.

"Altogether too gauzy!" Bowers asserted.

"It is the truth, as I am a living man!" the ruffian averred.

"You mustn't take the Old Man for a flat, you know. He wasn't the kind of man to give his secrets away. I wish I may die if I know anything at all about this passage!"

"Oh, nonsense!" Phenix retorted, "you are his right-hand man and deep in his secrets."

"Nothing of the kind! Of course I will admit that once in a while I was mixed up with some job that he engineered, but that is all."

"The only thing we can do is to get an ax or sledge-hammer and see if we can't break a way through this iron door," the detective observed, giving up as a bad job the attempt to gain information from Melancholy Mike.

Phenix believed, too, that the ruffian spoke the truth.

Such a first-class schemer as Malachi Everest, would be apt to keep his secrets to himself, for by intrusting them to one of his tools, he ran the risk of having them betrayed.

Warning Talbot to keep an eye on Melancholy Mike, Phenix went to the stables, which were near at hand, and succeeded in finding an ax.

He was determined upon forcing an entrance through the iron door, although he had little hope of discovering the fugitive, as he felt tolerably certain that this kind of rascals would not be fool enough to shut himself up in a hiding-place where he could be found by his enemies.

It was his belief that the trap-door was the entrance to some underground passage, by means of which the desperado chief could make his escape.

But whether Melancholy Mike knew this or not was a question difficult to answer.

The fellow swore that he did not, and it was possible he spoke the truth.

By the aid of the ax the iron door was forced, and, as Phenix expected, a secret underground passage was discovered leading to the boat-house on the river, so that by means of the boat, Everest had been enabled to escape.

The wolf had succeeded in breaking through the snare and was still at large.

The hunt was not yet ended, and Talbot's vow of vengeance was still unfulfilled.

Accompanied by the girl, overjoyed at her rescue, the three friends returned to the city.

Melancholy Mike had been dismissed with the injunction that he must be careful how he conducted himself in the future, if he did not wish to be sent to his old quarters up the river, and the rest who had been captured in the raid, were also released with the injunction that they had better take warning and lead honest lives, if they didn't wish to look through iron bars.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

AN unpleasant duty Talbot and Phenix had to perform, and that was to acquaint Fedelia with

the particulars of the untimely death of her mother.

It really seemed as if in this struggle the hand of Heaven had been interposed to protect the two sleuth-hounds, for Malachi Everest had planned with such fiendish skill that mere human wit alone would never have been able to baffle him, if not aided by accident.

It was a most fortunate circumstance—one of those rare things which so seldom occur—which sent the two rascals to the lair of the master scoundrel, at the very time when he expected a visit from the men who were hunting him with such untiring energy.

Then, too, the fact that the voice of one of them greatly resembled the voice of Talbot, led the hunted man into the belief that the blood-hounds, whom he sought to destroy, had entered the house.

Phenix, though, in some particulars, had deceived Everest when he had surprised him, acting on the time-honored detective policy.

The trap which Everest had sprung with such a ruthless hand had been only too successful.

The house had been shattered as though wrecked by an earthquake, and then the ruins had immediately taken fire; and though Talbot and Phenix, being in the immediate neighborhood, had hurried with all possible speed to lend assistance to the unfortunate beings, caught in so terrible a trap, they were not able to render them much aid.

One of the callers and the woman, who had opened the door for him, had been imprisoned in the ruins of the shattered house, evidently rendered insensible, if not killed outright, by the shock.

The second man, who had loitered behind his comrade, had been blown through the portal into the open air, and had just sense enough to gasp the names of himself and companion when the two men hurried to his assistance.

But within ten minutes he breathed his last.

The flames had burst out with such fury immediately after the explosion, that it was impossible for any one to enter the house, and by the time the fire-engines arrived, the flames had taken such complete possession of the building that it was impossible for the fire laddies to check the conflagration.

A fiery end was the fate of the man and woman imprisoned within the ruins, if they had survived the shock of the explosion.

The next day the bodies were recovered, but so disfigured by the flames as to be beyond recognition.

And this was the end of the woman whose life had been so strange a one.

Talbot and Phenix had a discussion in regard to the untimely death of Fedelia's mother and the Westerner volunteered to break the sad tidings to the girl.

Despite the wild life of adventure which he had led, Injun Dick could be as gentle as the tenderest woman when it was necessary, and it was with all possible care that he conveyed the sad intelligence to the girl.

She was deeply affected, being a gentle, sensitive creature, although not nearly as much as she would have been had her mother acted differently toward her.

But, as she said, from her earliest remembrance her mother had never shown to her the love that a mother should display toward her child, and so the holy bond, usually the strongest which exists in this world, was weakened.

As soon as the girl recovered from the emotions caused by the unexpected intelligence Talbot began to discuss the future.

He explained that having been intimately acquainted with her mother, he felt bound to do all for her that lay in his power.

Talbot did not come to particulars though, nor relate how his kindness had been abused.

"I am very grateful to you for your kindness!" the girl exclaimed with glistening eyes; and as Talbot surveyed her earnest face, the thought came to him that she was likely to prove a far truer and nobler woman in all respects than her unfortunate mother.

"But I do not wish to be a burden on any one. I am able to get my own living, as I have done for some years now, for, lately, I have received but little from my mother."

"Yes; but my dear Fedelia, I think you can do better than to go back to your life of drudgery at the store where you were employed."

"Mr. Phenix and myself have talked the matter over and have come to the conclusion that under the circumstances, we are in duty bound to look after you, and neither of us are willing that you should go back to the store."

"Oh, I am so sensible of your kindness!" Fedelia exclaimed.

"And I trust you will not think me strange when I declare that it will be hard for me to eat the bread of idleness."

"I am young and strong and having been accustomed to work it is no hardship for me so to do."

"Stay, stay, you are jumping too quickly to a conclusion!" Talbot replied.

"The sentiment which you have just uttered is a praiseworthy one and I am certain both Mr. Phenix and myself will think more highly of you, but it is not our intention to condemn you

to a life of idleness; on the contrary we intend to make you work hard."

"Mr. Phenix is in need of a secretary, one who can be thoroughly trusted, for in his business, where secrecy is so important, it would not do to intrust the details of his plans to a common person who might betray them."

"He suggested that you would answer for the position admirably, and as it is both important and responsible he can afford to pay you a good salary."

"You will be an inmate of this house, just as you are now, and in all respects will be treated by him as though you were his sister or daughter."

The girl did not reply for a few minutes but cast down her eyes and appeared to give way to deep reflection.

At last she spoke.

"Both yourself and Mr. Phenix have been so kind to me that I can hardly find words to express my thanks," she said.

"It is very fortunate indeed for me, situated as I am, that heaven has given me two such friends and I cannot be too grateful."

"Of course it will be much more pleasant for me to remain here than to go back again to the store, although I was well treated there and have no reason to complain."

At this point the girl hesitated and seemed to become a little confused, just as if there was something she wished to say and yet knew not exactly how to word it.

"Speak freely," observed Talbot, noticing her hesitation. "What is it you wish to say?"

"I—I don't know—I wish—" and then the girl paused in a helpless sort of way, and a vivid blush mantled her cheeks.

"Don't fear to confide in me," Talbot urged, and as he gazed in the lovely face of the girl he could not help thinking that he had never seen a more beautiful creature, for the charming confusion under which she was now laboring decidedly enhanced her beauty.

When he had encountered her mother amid the wilds of the West he had been attracted by her beauty; but the daughter was far more lovely, and then, too, she possessed qualities which the mother lacked.

The unfortunate woman, who had come to so terrible an end, was of a peculiar disposition and could not be depended upon; but from what he had seen of the daughter Talbot felt satisfied that a man would be safe in trusting his life to her.

And Talbot felt such an interest in the beautiful girl that if he had been a younger man he most certainly would have endeavored to win her for his own.

The girl hesitated for a few moments, and then, with an effort, recovering her composure, said:

"Of course, Mr. Talbot, I will gladly accept the kind offer which you have made me on behalf of Mr. Phenix, although, after what has happened, New York has become distasteful to me, and I would rather go somewhere else."

"You—you will not remain in the city, I presume?"

Shyly she put the question, as though it was one she thought she ought not to ask.

"I shall only remain here until I have completed the task which called me from my home in the West. When I succeed in capturing this scoundrel who has led me such a chase the business which brought me here will have ended, and then I shall return home."

"Can't you take me with you, Mr. Talbot?" cried the girl, in a sudden outburst, moving her chair so she could lay her hand upon his arm.

"I don't want to stay here in New York; it doesn't seem like home to me now!"

"Surely there will be something out where you live that I can find to do. I am very quick to learn, and I will try so hard if you will only take me with you. You have been so kind to me that it will be like a calamity to have you go away!"

"Oh, Mr. Talbot, you do not seem like a stranger. I cannot bring myself to believe that it is only a few days since we first met."

"It appears to me as if we are old acquaintances—more than that—you seem like a—like a—"

"Father," suggested our hero.

"Oh, no; not like a father—I could never think of you in the light of a father. You are not old enough for that," she replied, blushing to her temples.

"Well, I am not so young as I once was, nor yet an old man, either."

And then Talbot passed his arm gently around the slender waist of the girl; she did not shrink from the caress.

On the contrary it appeared to give her pleasure, although blushes covered her face until it seemed to her fancy as hot as fire, so she nestled her beautiful head on the manly breast of Talbot and thus hid her features.

"There is only one way, Fedelia, in which the matter can be arranged so that you can accompany me to the West, and that is by becoming my wife."

A slight thrill passed over the girl's perfect form, but otherwise she made no sign that the words had reached her ears.

"I suppose this is rather sudden; for a man to win such a glorious girl as you are, ought to take time, and not attempt to carry the fortress by storm."

"But still, as the poet says, 'love is not a flower which takes time to grow—to bud and blossom, but it springeth into being in a single hour.'"

"And so hath come my love for you. Not the less strong, perhaps, because it is the growth of a week rather than a year."

"I cannot offer you wealth, Fedelia, for fortune and myself haven't got along very well during the last year. Speculations which seemed to promise much, have turned out disastrously, and instead of making money I lost the sums invested."

"But in the wilds of the West there is always a chance for a man like myself to strike a rich lead, and so if you are willing to be content with an humble lot at first, the chances are good that we will rise to affluence in the end."

"What do you say, Fedelia, can you find love enough in your heart for me to risk the venture?"

"Oh, yes," replied the girl nestling still closer to him. "I have loved you from the moment when first we met, and I could not bear to remain here in New York and have you go away to the great West, and, perhaps, never see you again."

"A true case of love at first sight," Talbot observed, as he pressed a betrothal kiss upon the girl's ripe, red lips. "And I will do my best to keep you from ever having cause to repent your decision."

"But first to hunt this scoundrel down. Until that task is accomplished I have no time for anything else."

Phenix's entrance into the room at this point interrupted the lovers.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ANOTHER DEVELOPMENT.

THE moment the detective's hand touched the knob of the door, Fedelia, warned by the sound, withdrew from the embrace of her lover, but the keen eyes of the detective speedily detected the signs of embarrassment so plainly written upon the girl's face, and he was not long in coming to the conclusion that he had interrupted a love passage between the two.

In fact, the great detective had suspected how the girl felt toward the man who had come so timely to her rescue when Everest made his bold attempt to abduct her.

To watch people and guess at their secret thoughts had become a second nature to this experienced man-hunter, and so when he inquired of Talbot if he had made known to the girl his proposition in regard to the secretaryship, and the other replied that he had, but that Fedelia thought she would rather take a situation to go West, and there attend to his household matters. Phenix extended his congratulations, which the girl blushing received and then made her escape from the room as soon as possible.

Relieved of her presence the two began to discuss what would be the next move in the game.

"This fellow is no slouch, as we say in the West," Talbot observed.

"Decidedly not. In my opinion he is the most accomplished scoundrel I have ever encountered and I have had an extensive acquaintanceship in that line."

"This fellow carries out the German idea of the master-thief to the life."

"We have been able to give him a pretty hard run for it though," Talbot observed.

"That is true, and I doubt if during all his professional career he has ever been tighter pushed. I thought we had him foul when we caught him in the old house, but he managed to wriggle out of the scrape."

"Yes, he continued to fool us in an extremely smart way. I gave the fellow credit for being more of a wolf than a fox, and when we brought him finally to bay I believed he would turn and fight."

"I ought not to have been deceived by the shallow trick though," the detective observed.

"I ought to have known the rascal better. We had him fairly trapped, but after all the situation was not a serious one for him."

"The only charge we could have brought against him was abduction, and then, although we found the girl in his power, it is a question whether we could bring the actual guilt home to him, for there isn't the least doubt in my mind that, personally, he had nothing to do with the carrying off of the girl."

"Undoubtedly he could prove an alibi and thus slip through the fingers of the law with his accustomed ease, and then laugh at us for our credulity on thinking we could hold such a master-scoundrel as himself."

"It seems to me that the only way I will ever be able to get the best of this fellow will be to make a personal matter out of it, just as we do in the wild West; there, when two men have a grudge against each other, they don't bother the lawyers, but settle it with the best weapons they can command the first time they meet."

The detective smiled.

"In the West that is all right, but here in the East we call it murder, and if you should try that game and be unlucky enough to fall into the clutches of the law, it would cost you ten or twenty years in the State Prison which would be an extremely high price to pay for the satisfaction of 'laying out' your foe."

"Yes, that is true enough, and I don't think I should be willing to pay that price," Talbot observed.

"It seems hard too, that I can't get a crack at him, for the scoundrel has persistently sought my life right from the beginning."

"True, but his blows are dealt in secret, so that the law cannot reach him."

"Suppose I take example by him and try the same game, excepting that I am willing to give the fellow a fair chance for his life which is more than he has ever given me."

"The idea is a good one."

"I think so."

"We will try it—we will change our tactics, instead of attempting to catch him in some overt act so that we can turn him over to the law, we will scheme to bring you and him together, and in such a place that there can be no possible interference, and if you succeed in killing him in the fight no one will be the wiser in regard to it."

"That is exactly what I want!" cried Talbot, emphatically.

"And if I do not succeed in avenging the murder of my pard, then the scoundrel is welcome to go free."

"I have been thinking out a plan which I have an idea will work."

"The fellow is like a fox and doubles and twists so it is no easy matter to tell how to find him."

"We have been lucky enough though to twice gain a personal interview with him, despite his strenuous efforts to avoid the meeting, and, from certain discoveries which I have made, I feel tolerably well satisfied I can anticipate his next move, and if I am correct it will give us the opportunity we seek."

The entrance of Bowers at this moment interrupted the conversation.

In his hand the veteran held a newspaper—one of the afternoon journals, fresh from the press, and from the look upon the face of Bowers, both Talbot and Phenix could see that he believed he was the bearer of important information.

"Gen'l'men, hyer's a racket and no mistakel!" Bowers exclaimed, waving the newspaper.

"What is it?" Talbot inquired.

"The jig is up!"

"How so?"

"The cuss we have been hunting has passed in his checks."

Both the detective and the Westerner uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Sure as ye'r born! Hyer's the hull account in this newspaper."

He handed the sheet to Phenix, and the detective read the account aloud.

In the blackest of display lines was the heading:

"DEATH OF A WELL-KNOWN CROOK."

Then followed the particulars, which ran as follows:

"The police patrol boat just before daybreak this morning picked up in the East river the body of a man who had evidently met a violent death, as there were some fearful wounds on the head."

"From letters found upon his person the body was identified as that of Malachi Everest, who was well known to the police as one of the leading 'crooks' of the country."

Everest was a sort of king among the 'crackmen,' and bore the reputation of having planned more big jobs than any other man in his line in the country, although he always managed his game so shrewdly that the authorities were never able to get him dead to rights.

"It is surmised by the police that Everest was engaged in some plundering expedition and that a quarrel having arisen between the thieves, they resorted to violence and in the struggle Everest was killed. The murderers then abandoned the boat and made their escape."

"The police are working on some important clues and hope to be able to apprehend the culprits in a short time."

"Humph!" was the comment that the detective made when he came to the end of the account.

"As the cuss has passed in his checks, that upsets our little game," Joe Bowers observed.

"And if so be as how that is the lay-out, in my opinion, the quicker we get back to the shadows of the durned old Rocky Mountains the better."

"Joseph, my boy, this newspaper article is no proof that the man is dead," Talbot remarked.

"My own idea exactly," said Phenix.

"It must be true; ain't it in the newspaper and a newspaper never tells no lies, you know," the veteran observed with a grin.

"It is a plant to throw us off the track!" the detective declared.

"That is what it looks like to me," Talbot coincided.

"Not the least doubt about it in my mind. We have been pushing him so closely that he calculated we would be apt to surely run him down in the end and so he devised this cunning trick to make us give up the chase."

"S'pose we go and take a squint at the body," Bowers suggested.

"I reckon we have been introduced to the man once or twice, and if we take a look at the corpus we will be able to tell whether it is our mutton or not."

"No doubt about that, even though the face is disfigured, as I apprehend it is from the newspaper report in regard to the wounds on the head," Phenix observed.

"That would be his game, of course, to disfigure the face so as to make recognition difficult, if not impossible."

"No doubt it is a plant!" the detective exclaimed decidedly.

"Everest is too long-headed a scoundrel to allow any of his rascally associates to get the best of him."

"And then we know where he was last night and on what business he was engaged."

"The police jumped to the conclusion when they found the body that he had been in some river rat expedition and had been murdered by his confederates."

"We know better. We know that he escaped from us by means of a boat, and, although it is possible of course that he may have encountered some river pirates in his flight and have fallen their victim, yet it is not probable, for there isn't the least doubt that the fellow was armed to the teeth, and being an expert in the use of his weapons, could not be easily settled."

"But how about the body?" Talbot inquired.

"Where did that come from?"

"That is a mystery, certainly, but its solution doesn't concern us unless we come to the conclusion that it has something to do with our man. But let us go and take a look at the remains."

"Whar will we strike 'em?" asked Bowers.

"At the Morgue, as the city dead-house is termed, where all unclaimed bodies are placed on inspection."

"I catch on, me noble dook!" exclaimed the veteran, theatrically.

"I know what you mean; I am posted on all sorts of foreign lingo, and I reckon if I got a good ready on, that I kin parley-vou with any frog-eater you kin scare up."

The three went straight to the dead-house, but were too late to see the body as it had been claimed and removed.

"The body was recognized then?" Phenix asked. Being well acquainted with the keeper of the Morgue, it was an easy matter for him to gain all the information he required.

"Oh, yes."

"As Malachi Everest?"

"Yes, a lot of the crooks came after it."

"And there isn't any doubt that it is the body of Everest."

"Oh, no, none at all."

"You knew the man?"

"Yes, tolerably well."

"And did you recognize the body?"

"Well, yes, but I reckon I wouldn't if I hadn't been posted in regard to who he was, for the face was all disfigured. You see he must have got an awful tanning before he turned up his toes."

"I feel a curiosity to see the body," Phenix observed, quietly. "Do you know where the remains were taken?"

"Up to Harlem, somewhere, around One Hundred and Tenth street, near the river."

The three immediately set out, determined to learn the truth.

By inquiring of the policeman whose beat extended through that neighborhood, they succeeded in finding the house to which the body had been carried.

It was the residence of a well-known crook, with whom Phenix was personally acquainted; the man-hunter had been instrumental in providing him with a boarding-house up the river once, but, as he assured the detective when he greeted him, he bore no malice, but rather thanked him for doing him a good turn, for the trip to Sing Sing had been the means of making a new man of him, as after his release he had turned over a new leaf and was now leading an honest life.

Phenix expressed his pleasure at being the means of rescuing him from a crooked life, although as he spoke he knew the man was not telling the truth, but, on the contrary, was as big a rascal as ever.

The detective explained why he had come, and the host conducted him to the little, scantily-furnished parlor where the body reposed.

The room was dark, the curtains being drawn, and then, as the face was partially hid by the plasters and bandages which had been applied by the undertaker so as to make the body look as well as possible, besides being evidently much altered by the withering touch of the Great Destroyer, it was no easy matter for the three men to decide, as they stood by the coffin and gazed upon the unpleasant sight, whether they really looked upon the mortal remains of Malachi Everest or not.

"He's gone at last," remarked the host, assuming a sorrowful expression, as though the dead man was one who had been near and dear to him.

"Yes, I have often tried to catch him in a trap, but he is out of my reach now," Phenix observed, in a reflective sort of way.

"I suppose there isn't any doubt that it is Everest, for the face doesn't seem familiar to me?"

"Oh, no doubt at all about it!" the fellow declared, confidently. "The expression is changed, but I could swear to him among a thousand."

After a few more words the three departed. "It is a plant, sure enough!" Phenix declared, after they reached the street.

"It is a cunning trick on Everest's part to throw us off the track, but it will not work. The man is alive, and we must hunt him down!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CROOK AGAIN.

AND now we must return to Malachi Everest, and follow him in his flight.

Of course the escape by means of the trap door in the summer-house was all carefully planned in the cunning brain of this king of rascals when he declared his readiness to meet the western avenger in single fight.

He had not the slightest idea of exposing his precious person to the bullets of this determined foe, although, personally, the scoundrel was as brave a man as ever stepped foot to earth.

But he had a great deal of shrewdness, and as he did not believe he was a match for Talbot, he had no fancy to take part in a contest where the advantage would be on the side of his opponent.

He had proved that he was no coward when he had faced the avenger, sword in hand; but in that affair he fancied that Talbot stood no chance, and so he boldly confronted him.

Now he knew that the odds were against him, and he shrunk from the encounter.

He fancied that he would be able to make his escape by way of the summer-house, and that was the reason why he accepted the challenge so promptly.

Knowing the strength of the iron trap-door, which was worked by a secret spring, Everest shrewdly calculated that if he was able to get into the opening and close the iron barrier, his foes would never be able to find the spring which opened the trap, and before they could force a way through the door he would be safe from pursuit.

The plan worked to perfection.

As the reader has seen, the master-rascal early found an opportunity to slip into the passage, succeeded in closing the door, and by the time that his pursuers managed to force a way through the iron barrier, Everest had gained the boat-house, put on a rough pea-jacket and an oil-skin hat so that he looked like a boatman, then got into the craft and pushed out into the stream.

The tide was running swiftly toward the city, the light boat glided onward, and Everest laughed with glee as the old stone house vanished in the gloom.

"Tricked again, you cursed man-hunters," he cried.

"And, if I do not miss my guess, it will be a long time before you ever get me in as tight a place as the one in which you caught me to-night."

Everest pulled a lusty oar and the boat made a rapid progress onward.

The night was neither dark nor light; there was a moon, but its light was not strong, for the face of the sky was covered with misty clouds.

The fugitive was well acquainted with the locality though, and could have easily found his way, guided by the lights on shore, even if the night had been of Egyptian darkness.

When he arrived on a line with Forty-second street he headed for the New York shore.

"I must take precious good care how I move from this time out," he murmured.

"For after the way I have tricked them to-night there isn't the least doubt that Phenix will move both heaven and earth to get on my track again."

"It will hardly do to trust myself in any of the flash dens, for a watch will immediately be placed upon all of them the very moment that Phenix returns to the city."

"I must set my brains to work to devise some scheme which will confuse the bloodhounds and set them upon a false trail."

As he uttered the words he cast a glance over his shoulder in order to see if he was heading in the right direction, and as he did so his eyes fell upon a "floater."

"In the parlance of the rivermen, a 'floater' is a dead body drifting with the tide."

It lay upon its back, with its white and ghastly face upturned to the sky.

The body was that of a man about Everest's build and age, and attired in a dark business suit almost exactly like the one that the master-crook wore.

There were some ugly wounds upon the head which terribly disfigured the face, so that it would have been a difficult matter for even an intimate acquaintance to have recognized the mutilated and bloated features.

As he surveyed the body a bright idea occurred to Everest.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, "here is a chance to throw dust in the eyes of my pursuers!"

"I have some old letters addressed to me. I will put them into the pocket of this floater, and then, when the body is discovered, the chances are a thousand to one that the police will jump to the conclusion that Malachi Everest has at last cashed in his checks."

From the terrible wounds upon the head, and the fact that the pockets of the clothes were turned inside out, Everest jumped to the conclusion that the body was that of some stranger who had wandered to the river-side, where he had been assaulted and robbed.

And then, in order to destroy all traces of their crime, the ruffians had pitched their victim overboard, and if their blows had not extinguished his life, the strangling waves completed the job.

As Everest had expected, all the pockets were empty, so that no articles could be found by means of which the identity of the dead man might be disclosed.

Malachi stuffed the letters into one of the pockets, and then left the body to the action of the tide, while he pulled into the dock.

"There, I reckon that trick will work!" he exclaimed with a deal of satisfaction.

"Unless the bloodhounds are shrewd enough to smell out the trick, which I doubt, they will come to the conclusion that in escaping from them, I ran into some dock gang, who laid me out. Anyhow, even if they suspect the truth, this will bother them for a while; and while they are puzzling over the matter, I will take measures to escape from the country, for since this infernal demon of a Talbot has struck in on my track, it is getting entirely too hot to hold me."

At the dock he made the boat fast to a float, where a half a dozen others lay, and then ascended the flight of steps which led to the top of the pier.

It was no blind chance which had led Everest to this particular spot.

On the contrary, it was a settled and deliberate purpose.

He was in the immediate neighborhood of one of his secret haunts; in his opinion, the safest refuge he possessed.

It was a little, dilapidated stable, occupied by a cartman, but in the rear was a small room, and from the room access could be had to a cellar, which extended under the whole building.

And in this cellar Everest had quite comfortable quarters.

Only one man besides Everest had any knowledge of this secret haunt, and that was his confidential familiar, Melancholy Mike.

Entrance to the room was gained by a door in the rear of the stable, which was reached by a narrow passage leading to the small yard in the rear of the building.

So, under the shadows of the night, it was an easy matter for any one to dodge into the passageway without attracting any attention.

The apartment was provisioned for a siege.

There was plenty to eat and drink, lights to illuminate the darkness and books to while away the time.

And when Everest proceeded to the secret haunt, he took great care that he was not observed, for before he entered the passageway he examined the surroundings in the most careful manner so as to make sure that no spy was lurking in the neighborhood.

Not that he thought there was much danger in that direction, for this was a haunt that he never used excepting when he was hard pressed, and was hunted so closely that his ordinary hiding places seemed to be unsafe.

And when the hunted man gained the cellar, lit a lamp and sunk in the embraces of a comfortable-looking rocking chair, he drew a long breath, and exclaimed:

"There, at last I am safe from pursuit."

"Now, Joe Phenix, do your worst; you will never be able to smell me out in this snug retreat."

"And as for you, you western bloodhound, bold Dick Talbot, I laugh at your malice now and can safely defy you to harm me!"

"You must move quickly too if you try to strike another blow at me, for within three days, if luck at all stands my friend, I will be out of this cursed country."

"I have plenty of money and I will go abroad and live like a prince in some foreign land."

"To-morrow, Melancholy Mike will come and then I will know how the land lies."

"If my ruse deceives them, or even causes them to relax their vigilance for a few hours, I will have a chance to get out of their reach."

Then, as he did not expect Melancholy Mike for a good twenty hours, he sought the couch which stood invitingly ready in one corner of the apartment and in a few moments was wrapped in slumber's chain.

CHAPTER XL.

ANOTHER TRAP.

PROMPTLY—almost to the moment when he was expected by Everest—Melancholy Mike made his appearance, and was warmly greeted.

"What is the news, Mike?" Everest queried.

"In the first place you are dead."

"That's good—if every one believes it."

"Well, I think almost everybody is fooled."

"Did it deceive you?"

"Oh, no, though I was staggered for a moment when I read about the affair in the newspapers."

Melancholy Mike produced a newspaper, pointed out the account of how the body was discovered, and waited until Everest perused it.

"The police were quite sure that your humble servant had croaked at last," Everest observed.

"Yes, and the news kinder upset me for a while, for the account seemed so positive that I thought, maybe, it might be true."

"So I histed up to the Morgue where the stiff was to get a look at it, but the moment I clapped my peepers on the body I knew it wasn't you."

"I smoked your game though immediately and went in to help you all I could."

"I guessed that it was a trick on your part to throw the dogs off the scent, and so I hunted up Billy Matthews and had him claim the body; then gave the office to all the lads to swear that it was you."

"Did you hear whether the matter had come to Phenix's knowledge or not?"

"Oh, yes, he got on to it immediately. He hustled up to the Morgue to see the body, and when he found it had been carried to Harlem he came up there to get a look at it."

"And did he swallow the bait?"

"Well, Billy said that he acted as if he was a little doubtful, but he gave it to him strong and he had an idea that the detective went away pretty well satisfied that you had given up the ghost."

"If it will only check his pursuit for two or three days I shall be satisfied, for that will give me time to get out of the country," Everest observed.

Melancholy Mike looked astonished.

"Going to cut and run?"

"That is the programme."

"Well, Joe Phenix and this devil of a Talbot have made it rather hot for you."

"Yes, entirely too hot to be agreeable, and I propose to get out."

"I guess that would be the best game to play, for I have often noticed in a case of this kind when the luck is running strongly against a man that the only way to turn the thing is to quit and wait a while before you try it again."

"That is the idea exactly. To drop into metaphor, this New World orange I have sucked dry and I must seek fresh fruit elsewhere."

"That's the ticket!" exclaimed Melancholy Mike, emphatically.

"You have played this region for all it is worth, and if you keep on the chances are you will find yourself inside of a stone jug the first thing you know."

"The fact is, these two men are too much for you, and in the long run are bound to win, if you keep up the fight."

"Yes, yes, I am satisfied in regard to that," the master-scoundrel observed, thoughtfully.

"I don't like to admit that I have been beaten, but when I am I never attempt to disguise the matter."

"As a red-skin would say, this Talbot's medicine is too much for me."

"I have aimed blow after blow at his head, and all of them planned with a demon-like skill, and yet, in the most marvelous manner, he has succeeded in escaping one and all."

"Now, I am satisfied, and I am going to give up the contest."

"And so you are going to quit the game and give leg-bail?"

"That is my idea."

"Well, I think you are wise," Melancholy Mike remarked, after deliberating over the matter for a moment.

"I think Europe will be good enough for me. I have plenty of money and can live like a fighting-cock, without being obliged to do a stroke of work, unless I feel inclined."

"That is an elegant prospect."

"What do you say to a trip across the herring pond?"

"Oh, I'm your pal for life or death," Melancholy Mike replied, immediately.

"The quicker we are off the better; but we will have to pay a visit to the stone house, for I have some valuables hidden there, and it will not do to leave them behind, as there is no telling when I will see this country again; it may not be for years."

"Do you think there will be any danger in making the visit?"

"I think not," Everest replied.

"We can take the boat and go by water, and in the darkness we can easily detect whether the detective has placed any one in charge of the house or not."

"If there is, it will not be apt to interfere with my plans, for we can get into the cellar by the secret rear passage without the knowledge of anybody who may happen to be in the house."

"There is a small safe hidden in the cellar, and in the safe the plunder is stored."

"Oh, I don't think there will be any danger in making the trip," Melancholy Mike observed.

"As Phenix has hunted us out of that hole once, he will not be apt to think we will return there again."

"That's my idea; and then, after we secure the wealth, we will get out."

"We can cross the river at Astoria and take a

midnight train at Harlem over the New Haven Railroad, then can make our way by a round-about route into Canada, going up by way of New Hampshire, and there we can bide our time, working gradually toward Halifax; at this point we can take a steamer to Europe."

"That game will work!" Melancholy Mike exclaimed, in a tone of conviction.

Everest looked at his watch.

"It is after ten now; suppose we start?"

"All right."

"It will take about an hour to make the trip."

After due preparations the two set out.

The streets were deserted, and the pair did not encounter a single soul on their way to the dock.

As the tide was against them it was a long and hard pull, but at last the old stone house rose, ghost-like, out of the shadows of the night.

The place was apparently deserted, for not a light was visible, but this pair of crooked men proceeded with as much caution as though they expected the house was occupied by a squad of detectives.

As stealthily as red Indians stealing upon an unsuspecting foe they approached the house.

"It is all right," Everest whispered in the ear of his companion as they halted in the shadows of the mansion.

"Oh, yes, no doubt of it."

"I didn't think they would leave any watch here for it didn't seem probable that after having been caught in a trap here once we would be apt to come back again."

"If Phenix knew there was a boodle in the cellar though he wouldn't think that way."

"Our friend, Joseph, is a pretty smart fellow, as detectives go, but it is a moral impossibility for him to know everything," Everest replied, complacently.

Then the two descended to the cellar.

It was an ordinary apartment; as is usually to be found under such a mansion.

"I'll light the gas so we will be able to see what we are about," Everest observed.

They had found their way into the cellar by the aid of a dark lantern—a regular cracksman implement, with which Melancholy Mike was provided.

At the further end of the main cellar were two doors, one led into the coal-bin, the other into a small room designed for a wine-cellar.

"The safe is in the coal cellar yonder concealed by a lot of wood," said Everest.

"Give me a hand to roll it out."

Melancholy Mike gladly accommodated his pal.

The safe was brought into the light; Everest opened it and produced a number of packages carefully tied up in yellow wrapping-paper.

"A pretty substantial boodle here, about thirty thousand dollars," Everest observed with a chuckle.

"I am glad to hear it!" exclaimed the stern, deep voice of Joe Phenix.

And then from the wine-cellar the detective advanced, followed by Talbot and Joe Bowers.

All of them held cocked revolvers in their hands.

The master-thief and his pal were caught in a terrible trap.

In sullen rage they glared at the others.

"Everest, you are about as accomplished a rogue as I ever encountered, but the best planned schemes fail sometimes."

"Napoleon was a marvel who brought the world to his feet, but Waterloo came at last."

"And so it is with you; your career of crime has been a long one and wonderfully successful, but you have reached the end of your rope now."

By this time Everest had recovered from his surprise and regained his self-possession.

Rising to his feet he faced his foes.

"You are a smart fellow, Phenix, but you haven't got me dead to rights yet!" he exclaimed.

"I am a rascal, of course, but I defy the law to take a hold on me that I cannot break."

"It is to me you are to answer, not the law!"

Talbot cried, sternly. "One or both of us will never leave this place alive. The murder of Limber Bee must be avenged. How will you have it, pistol or knife?"

The end had come and the conflict could not be avoided.

"Knife!" cried Everest, fiercely, producing an ugly-looking eight-inch "bowie" as he spoke.

Talbot's weapon—a similar one—was quickly in his hand.

And hardly was he in position when Everest sprang at him with the fury of a tiger.

Small chance though had such a man when opposed to a desperate duelist like Injun Dick.

The blow was parried, and then the knife of the avenger struck home.

A single stroke only and the assassination of Limber Bee in the far Western canyon was atoned.

The master-scoundrel sunk to the ground, gasped and died.

Our tale is told.

At some future time we may relate how Fedelia, with Dick Talbot, journeyed to the West, how Phenix followed and of the strange adventures which befell the three in the land of the setting sun, where Richard Talbot won the title of Injun Dick.

THE END.

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